

Congregations and Polarization

Listening Tour

ST. PETER'S UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST — CARMEL, 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.

Central Indiana Pastors Discuss LGBTQ+ Inclusion

"...(W)e decided not to vote on being 'reconciling' and taking a stand. We merged with another congregation that had voted a few years back, so over the last several years we've been speaking more openly, and now it's fair to say the community sees us as that church, we see ourselves as that church in town. We never voted, but we attended our first Pride fest in downtown Indianapolis this year. At the time of the vote, I was afraid it would go the other way if we did vote, and I said I would have to leave if we voted against being reconciling, and that was a big deal for me and for them. Many people said what we're doing here is more important than that, so we don't want to risk the vote." — Listening Tour Participant

On October 1, 2024, our third listening session was convened by St. Peter's United Church of Christ. The group was composed of pastors and associate pastors from mainline churches who were progressive on most social issues. The conversation started with human sexuality and gender identity issues and never strayed far from them. There is no way to know if this is the single most important issue to all these pastors; we can only know that this issue came up first and it was important enough to animate the entire conversation.

The responses of the congregations ranged from generally supportive of LGBTQ+ persons to very supportive, and inclusive, of LGBTQ+ persons. Or, put another way, there was no dissent about whether to be accepting, only questions about how the congregation would frame the matter.

But there was disagreement about whether to draw a hard line, to go through the discernment process to become "open and affirming" or "reconciling"

to announce publicly that people of non-binary sexuality were fully welcome and able to be married or to serve in leadership. Some pastors described their congregations as welcoming and accepting already; they were not sure it was wise to risk dissent and possible schism by taking a further step and causing their members to stay or leave based on the outcome. They did not want this issue to become a “label” for their congregation.

One young pastor took issue. They said, “The ‘no label’ thing rubs up against me as an LGBTQ+ person. When did we decide that because we don’t talk about things, it’s okay—that it was okay for the oppressor to sit next to the oppressed, if you will sit at this table, you will watch what you say and behave in a way that aligns with our values. Being a Christian should cost you something in this world. If that means that you become a target or people stop coming, that is your cost, your expense. I struggle when it comes to polarization. We have demonized polarization because it divides us, but Jesus’ message was inherently political. If Jesus is your stake in the ground, then the Church needs to be against the oppressors.”

One pastor responded, “You’re called to a people that have unanimity. I feel like that’s a privilege I would love

to have sometimes but to feel like that call of the Holy Spirit is in that place that doesn’t have uniformity.” Said another pastor, “I hear you and I don’t have enough fingers to count the number of people who would have left if we would have voted or we would have put the flags out and who have moved in remarkable ways because they stayed. I think because we did it the way we did, now grandma has two openly gay kids that she’s come to love, because of where we started and who was there, it made sense to do it. I don’t want to be a stumbling block that gives them an excuse to fall down and get out when they can stay and listen.”

This conversation encompassed, in a very short space, the dilemma facing congregations that are what most would call liberal, but not composed only of progressive members. Is it better to plant a flag in the ground and ask, “Are you in or out?” Or is it better to accept the gradual change that allows more people to remain “in” over a longer period?

Which issues are accorded this “flag” status? Would a congregation say “in or out” on the topic of abortion? Of racism? Of immigration? Must the congregation draw a line for each of the issues under every circumstance?



A group from St. Peter’s United Church of Christ attending the Indianapolis Pride Parade. Photo provided by St. Peter’s UCC.