



# Congregations and Polarization

## Listening Tour

SHILOH MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH — INDIANAPOLIS, 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.

### Black Pastors Confront Systemic Injustice

Our session at Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church included eight senior pastors and two associate pastors. One senior pastor was a woman. All were African American and their congregations were predominantly African American, mostly in neighborhoods anyone would describe as “urban.”

The session was seven days before the national election. More importantly, it was three days after the Madison Square Garden event where a comedian told racist jokes and referred to Puerto Rico as “floating garbage.” That event came up in the first five minutes. For only the second time on our listening tour, both among African Americans, the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 also came up almost immediately. Black pastors were keenly aware of both of the issues at stake and the talking points surrounding those issues.

These pastors knew and were comfortable with one another. While they went back and forth in conversation, they also clearly focused their remarks on our two researchers, making sure we understood what they were describing.

They believed the most energizing, animating issue for their congregants was economic injustice. Though none of them said the words “Critical Race Theory” until the project team brought it up, they talked about systemic problems. It was noted to them that in all our interviews for this project, white pastors respond philosophically about racism, often mentioning Critical Race Theory and problems with seeing racism as a quality inherent in systems rather than in individuals. Whereas Black pastors do not necessarily say Critical Race Theory, but when they describe racism, they immediately go to

systemic problems like access to education, healthcare, groceries, transportation, good jobs, and similar issues.

For the second time (again the two sessions among African Americans), some pastors did not say former President Trump's name. One just said "45."

After spending about 45 minutes on economic inequality, one of the pastors said he thought LGBTQ+ issues were also important in the Black Church. Another of the pastors noted that "it's interesting that the youngest pastor in the room mentioned this." (I cannot say for certain they were the youngest pastor, but it seems likely.)

This led to the expression of different views. The dominant view was that (a) all of their congregations have gender-diverse members and (b) they had a responsibility to love those people and preach the gospel. However, homosexuality was generally described as sin, though, to be sure, not a greater sin than several others known among their church members. The original speaker, the "youngest pastor," did not seem comfortable with this view.

We pushed slightly and asked about the metaphor of oppressor and oppressed that was frequent in their discussion of racial inequality. "Is the LGBTQ+ community ever framed as the oppressed in your

congregations?" It seemed not to be, though the "second youngest" pastor in the room said they did talk about it that way in their sermons and did see oppression as the operative framing for the issue, including oppression of women as well as gender-diverse communities.

Two different things were apparent during this conversation. First, it was clear enough that for all the talk of intersectionality, these pastors regarded the Black community as a bloc. They know it's not monolithic, but they still see it as real and important and possible, if difficult, to mobilize.

Second, there was a moment of clarity, which edged close to despair because there was a realization that to these ministers the requirements of the Gospel were crystal-clear: The Gospel was about freeing the oppressed and in the present moment that meant racial justice. Which led us to think back to the Mennonites who believe the Gospel required them to be advocates for peace and to free the oppressed in Palestine. And then to the 96th Street progressive pastors and their mandate to combat oppression of LGBTQ+ persons. All of them were focused on liberating oppressed communities and none of them saw "community" the same. They each see the Gospel as prioritizing differently. As focused as our project is on context and the way it influences pastors and their ministries, we are looking at the degree to which context made each agenda very different.

