The ‘Religious District’ of Elite Congregations: Reproducing Spatial Centrality and Redefining Mission

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Elite congregations in urban areas form a “religious district,” a socially constructed religious space, that reproduces yet continually redefines the meaning of that space. I apply insights from urban ecology, the new urban geography, and ‘agency’ theory to examine how congregations in a religious district are shaped by their geographic, cultural, and social contexts. Yet, partly through the changing social geography and partly through the conflicts and struggles of daily congregational life, a new ecological mix emerges that is both anchored in the structures of denominational and urban history of this particular social and geographic environment, but also impressed by creative human actors. Finally, I examine how congregations use the continually evolving religious district to support their mission.

From an aerial perspective, the congregations of metropolitan Indianapolis are evenly, almost randomly, distributed through urban space. From the perspective on the ground, however, where the city emerges in texture as well as shape, many patterns are visible. One pattern is the high status “religious district” along northbound Meridian Street. In this paper I examine how geographic and social factors construct this spatial pattern, forming particular identities for congregations individually and as a “district.” In turn, these identities are factors in organizing each congregation’s form of public space and the ways it is used, especially for its religious mission and role in the city.

Using a spatial construct illuminates a currently underdeveloped aspect of social theory (Urry 1996; Soja 1985, 1989; Tuan 1977) that, in turn, could advance our understanding of religious ecology. The timely conjunction of

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1 I am borrowing this term from Omar McRoberts (2000) who adapted it from St. Clair Drake (1968) to describe a dense religious cluster of mostly storefront churches in a poor, Boston neighborhood.
urban ecology and religious restructuring, stimulated by the work of Nancy Eiesland (2000) and a few others, is part of a broader rethinking of religion and the spatial dimension of urban theory in the last three decades. Understanding spatiality, the ways in which territorial and social rules mutually constitute each other (Sack 1993:327), adds interpretive power to a taken-for-granted aspect of social actions and social relationships (Soja 1985), the fundamental material and contextual factors without which social life makes no sense. Spatiality is socially produced space in which social life is situated and upon which "purposeful human agency jostles problematically with tendential social determinations to shape everyday activity, particularise social change, and etch into place the course of time and the making of history" (Soja 1985:90). A religious district is a context for understanding the geographic, cultural, and social environment that competes with the initiatives of congregational members for defining their congregational identities and "etching into place" particular social roles elite congregational play in Indianapolis.

In this article, I apply insights from urban ecology, the new urban geography, and 'agency' theory and their relevance to religious congregations to examine the concept of "religious district" (McRoberts 2000). This type of religious ecology includes a specific built environment and certain behaviorally-defined territories that produce new social relationships (Soja 1985:94, 123). Using the concept of a religious district as a socially constructed religious space, I can explore the ways specific congregations — in their material and cultural constitution — shape and are shaped by this particular religious space. I also examine the ways congregations in the religious district shape the wider territory of the city in their roles as actors in public arenas.

WHAT IS A DISTRICT?

The term "district," in its ordinary definition, is a political or geographic division created for particular purposes (Webster's New World Dictionary 1962). This suggests, first, public attributes. It points to spaces visible to the eye and approachable by the ordinary citizen. It is a practical, accessible space that confers an identity granted and understood by all through common, accepted use. Second, it suggests centrality, but in a modified form. During the era of industrial growth, centrality in city-building was preferred by elites because it created the conditions for control of space. The limits of transportation and communication mandated it. City downtowns were centers of institutional but also


3 These data were developed from historical research, statistical surveys, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted by The Polis Center between 1995 and 2001, which was supported by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc.
spatial power because the powerful were there (Clay 1980:35-37). While a
district is itself a geographic center, in the restructured, late twentieth century
city, the district is a decentralized form of spatial power.

As a particular space, a district has a distinct identity. The composition of
religious districts in terms of membership location affects the impact of the
congregation on the religious district and its surrounding institutions. At the
same time, the religious district affects the congregations' internal structure —
who attends, who has authority, what activities they emphasize, and what kind
of internal religious and social culture they create. Four general types of religious
districts are readily observable in urban areas. Two are neighborhood-based: the
cluster of formerly immigrant Catholic parishes and the Jewish neighborhood
crowned by an etnu. The racially and ethnically exclusive parishes on the
Southwest side of Chicago form an example of the first type (Wedam 2000),
while the Orthodox Jewish institutions along Bathurst Street in Toronto
examined by historian Etan Diamond (2000) describe the latter. Two other
types of religious districts are commuter-based, a high status as well as a low
status type. Poor storefront congregations clustered in impoverished African-
American areas, such as Four Corners Boston, is analyzed by Omar McRoberts
(2000). The grouping of wealthy congregations of mainline Protestants such as
those along Meridian Street is the subject of this article.

Religious districts of high-status congregations exist in lower-density space
than those composed primarily of low status congregations, or they are neigh-
borhood-based. High status congregations need a large "moat" around each of
their castles. Just as centrality itself is an ancient technique for demonstrating
power, so is commanding protective space. Yet the spatial drama is similar to
non-elite and neighborhood-based districts in other respects, such as the curio-
sity that is aroused when onlookers notice a multipurpose church campus in
their purview. Religious architecture can still startle the pedestrian with its
power, captured in the midst of the everyday, to symbolize the non-profane
world.

Geographic districts are most often rectangular or amoeba-like. But like
Bathurst Street in Toronto, Meridian Street is simply a street. Yet unlike the
Toronto example, in the consciousness of Indianapolis residents Meridian Street
is a preeminent symbol of the city (Hunter 1974:10, 88-94). Meridian Street
both links the downtown core with the booming northern regions and show-
cases the city's economic and aesthetic achievements. During the early growth
of the city, many of the city's most powerful institutions, such as major insurance
firms, the internationally recognized Children's Museum, and the Lilly Endow-
ment, Inc., built their headquarters on the street. About half way along the
length of the street, twenty blocks support a historic preservation district of
sometimes ostentatious Victorian mansions. The governor's mansion is located
along this stretch, although it is comparatively one of the more modest
domiciles.
The congregations are intermittent but prominent along Meridian Street, each displaying distinctive and costly architecture. From the neoclassical design of the Catholic cathedral downtown, to the thirteenth century English Norman church of Trinity, to the exquisite French Gothic of Second Presbyterian, and concluding in the wide spaces of suburb-like tracts with spare shapes and modern lines of St. Luke's United Methodist and the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, none of these congregations can be casually overlooked. While these prominent congregations created their prominence because of their location they are continually confronted with it. A high status religious district both represents and shapes the power of elite religion.

The congregations' layered, linear placements took shape over the last 150 years. The movement of the elite residents of Indianapolis into the northern part of the city, as the city itself grew spatially, created a continual re-clustering of elite congregations on and adjacent to Meridian Street as they attended to the changing needs and re-locations of their members. These churches are attracted by the elite status of the street but their relationship to the street has changed over time and in accord with their particular location on the street. The congregations' different distances from the downtown core reflect different stages of the city's growth and therefore influence the kinds of congregation they are, in part determined by the types of members they attract, for example urban or suburban. Their specific locations in the district, whether abutting low-income Mapleton-Fall Creek or affluent Meridian Hills, affect the ties they make with the neighborhoods.

Today, near the downtown public and commercial core, the two cathedrals, Christ Church Episcopal and Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic, remain diocesan and city-wide symbols of an earlier centralization of authority and prestige. Both cathedrals are pressed by commercial buildings on all sides, but appear to stand defiantly against any suggestion they are out of place, particularly Christ Church, the only remaining congregation on Monument Circle. Where once 49 churches stood in Indianapolis' central "mile square," that bounded the original platting of the new capitol city, about ten remain (Shipps 1994).

The first phase of congregational movement substantially out of the mile square extended to Mapleton-Fall Creek, a typical urban mixed residential and commercial neighborhood. This neighborhood, where Trinity Episcopal, Tabernacle Presbyterian, and North United Methodist are located, was once wealthy but is now relatively poor (Farnsley 2001). Each church developed an 'urban' identity as a result of its choice to remain amidst the changing surrounding neighborhood racial and class composition. Street and commercial life is active around this part of Meridian Street where boundaries of race, age, occupation, and income can (still) be crossed along the sidewalks. Next, Meridian Street United Methodist and St. Paul's Episcopal were the first essentially "suburban" churches surrounded by suburban style yards. A residential quietude marks the atmosphere around them. This is where one first notices
that street life is essentially confined to the automobile because the sidewalks have disappeared. Finally, even these churches were overtaken by the newest and wealthiest suburb-like area at the very edge of the city where St. Luke Catholic, Second Presbyterian, Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, 1st Congregational, St. Luke's United Methodist, and 1st Baptist now flourish in sprawling, weighty campuses. These buildings are especially large and imposing, conveying awe, but also remoteness and privacy.

Map 1. Economic characteristics of areas along Meridian Street, Indianapolis. 4

Centrality, History, and Ecological Pressures.

The religious district, as a particular kind of social ecology, is shaped by its surrounding environment (McKenzie, 1967). Over time, churches and other actors within the district interact with the environment in a wide variety of ways.

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4 These maps are adapted from W. Mirola's Charting Congregational Cultures. Project on Religion and Urban Culture. The Polis Center-IUPUI.
and in response to geographic pressures (Park 1967; Abbott 1997). Despite the somewhat transparent identity of wealth and highly educated members, the Meridian street congregations are not a monolith — there are important differences among them as well. As individual congregations, they take up and form “particularistic spaces” so the district promotes variety in religious participation (McRoberts 2000:69-70). In addition, the strengths and weaknesses of congregational leaders vary, as do their social commitments to local communities and to various forms of collaboration that address local and metropolitan needs.

While this district is partly constrained by space, it is also constrained by a variety of social and economic factors. The social ecological perspective uses concepts of cooperation and expansion, as well as competition and conflict (Eiseland 2000) that are illustrated by demographic shifts, status needs, philanthropic benefactions, and even episcopal high-handedness. Early historical accounts of religious organizations in Indianapolis readily illustrate the beginning of these broader processes.

When the Meridian Street Methodist Church suffered a fire in the early 1900s, it selected a site for rebuilding close to another Methodist church, but determined that the option to buy the property would only be taken if Hall Place Methodist Episcopal Church had no objection. “As it turned out, Hall Place did object, so the site was not acquired” (Evans 1996:26). The church’s current building was completed in 1952 after five different moves on Meridian Street. In the final move, the church merged with a smaller congregation less than a mile away which itself had merged some years earlier with Hall Place — the church Meridian Street deferred to in its site selection in 1905. It happened that Hall Place lost its building in 1932 when the City of Indianapolis widened the street on which it was located (Evans 1996).

Heightened competition for location and members during the last days of the nineteenth century marked the relationship of St. Paul’s Episcopal with Christ Church Episcopal Cathedral, a tension which did not subside until St. Paul’s Church moved to its “suburban” location in 1947 (Roettger and Thompson 2000). When St. Paul’s began planning for its current site during the middle of World War II, Trinity Episcopal, a smaller parish also located directly on Meridian Street, approached it with thoughts of a merger, being without a rector at the time. But “St. Paul’s counter-proposal would have effectively caused Trinity to lose its identity once the new St. Paul’s was built. [Trinity] eventually voted down the counter-proposal.” (Roettger and Thompson, 2000:119) They considered one additional merger before regaining financial stability. Besides, the bishop “saw the advantages [to another Episcopal church] being on Meridian Street” (Trinity Parish Profile 1999:31). Similarly, hidden between the lines of North United Methodist Church’s congregational history is the 1921 story of a suspicious merger apparently engineered by a recently arrived and ambitious episcopate. Maple Grove Methodist, a congregation since 1843, and
in a building one-half block west of Meridian Street since 1855, was asked to join with the newly incorporated North Church after its Meridian Street site was already purchased. It took almost ten years, but the little white frame church was eventually replaced by a lofty Gothic one (Hale and Harmon, undated:8-11).

**MAP 2**

Meridian Street "Religious District" ca. 1900 - 1940s

Map 2. Meridian Street religious district at turn of twentieth century.

**Legacy and change**

A fully social ecological account needs to incorporate factors both internal and external to the district. Only then is it possible to see that through the conflicts and struggles of daily congregational life, a new mix emerges that reproduces and changes the religious district. This mix is anchored in the structures of denominational and urban history within this particular context, while simultaneously impressed by creative human actors among the congregations themselves.
While the district retains an elite composition, it has not fully reproduced that earlier profile. Prior to World War II in Indianapolis, an estimated 97 percent of the social leaders were members of (mostly high status) churches (Farnsley, Demerath, Diamond, Mapes and Wedam). In 1990, church membership of this leadership group roughly approximates the city-wide average (48 percent as reported by the Glenmary survey). The composition of the membership is likely also to have changed insofar as educational and occupational mobility has broadened participation in American institutions generally. Other new opportunities and new risks that enabled the congregations to change the profile include: the broader commuting patterns; the changes in the leadership patterns among the laity; choices the clergy have initiated; the discernment process that many congregations undergo at times of crisis or loss; and the decisions they have made about money. In the context of the district’s history and denominational structures, the multiple decisions by congregations illustrate the agency/structure dialectic that conjoins in new ways an “ensemble of forces” in order to achieve a different outcome (Molotch, Freudenberg and Paulsen 2000:792). These outcomes retain elements of the legacy, while congregations continue to redefine the meaning of the religious district.

Resources and strains

It would be difficult to overestimate the depth of responsibility these wealthy congregations feel regarding their financial stewardship. The endowment of St. Paul’s is now valued at $54 million and just over $1 million was disbursed through its external programs last year. With an endowment about half this size, Trinity granted $200,000. Christ Church Episcopal (having received the largest Lilly family bequest, totaling now $100 million) and Second Presbyterian (which has a substantial endowment not raised with the help of a Lilly bequest) give comparable sums. At the same time, the congregations’ wealth cannot escape being noticed and such burdens are not insignificant. Some members of the endowed parishes speak openly of the deleterious effect their endowment has had on the “spirit of the congregation.” They lament the sometimes acrimonious debates over the decision-making process, “should the Holy Spirit guide us, or should we take applications?” Arguments over the use of the money have lasted decades.

A characteristic that the Meridian Street churches share is the extensive and intensive participation of the laity in church activities. Highly educated members bring resources to their congregations that the Meridian Street clergy encourage and cultivate, even to the point of sometimes having to step aside. In accounting for the extensive involvement of North’s members, an associate explained that the laity “expect you to let go because this is [their] ministry.” Other pastors are seeking an appropriate balance from parishioners accustomed to leadership roles in their work lives. “From Monday through Friday, the
members of this church are their own bosses," remarked a Catholic associate pastor somewhat ruefully. "They think they can be in charge on Saturday and Sunday as well." Precisely for these reasons, however, the human capital and social commitments possessed and exercised by these members result in extensive community and social service outreach projects.

While these congregations display many of the "leader" qualities Penny Edgell Becker (1999) chronicled in her account of mostly white, middle-class suburban congregations, certain differences are noteworthy. One significant point is the presence of joint clergy and laity leadership in the Meridian Street congregations. Related to this is an emphasis on activism that is more economic than political and expresses an individual-based rather than systemic orientation toward changing the world. A second point is the predominance of both denominational ties and hierarchical polity within the leader congregations. The latter finding may be related to a particular history of mainline Protestant dominance in Indianapolis that is a partial variant (Farnsley 2002) on the widely accepted accounts of disestablishment and religious pluralism in the United States (Warner 1993). The Meridian Street findings may also be related to smaller size and lesser racial and ethnic heterogeneity in Indianapolis than is the case in most other cities studied.

Wealthy congregations, like all congregations, must work to attract members. The search for new members is aided, but not entirely solved, by location in the district, with its visibility and high status identity. Other spatial factors, such as suburbanization, help membership growth even more. Those at the farthest north end of the street are more likely to have strong and growing memberships, particularly St. Luke’s Methodist, Second Presbyterian, and St. Luke Catholic. Included also is the Reform synagogue, Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, the largest and wealthiest of the five synagogues in Indianapolis, its membership including about half of the affiliated Jews in Indianapolis. As is typical of those in the Reform movement (stemming from historic divisions between poorer east European and wealthier and more assimilated German Jewry [Cutler 1996]), the Hebrew Congregation chose to build its facilities outside of the Jewish enclave, which is about three-fourths of a mile to the west. The Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation preferred the prestigious location of Meridian Street, which spatially, ethnically, and in terms of status, separates them from the Jewish subculture.

But the other churches along Meridian Street, despite their large memberships and budgets, are under stress. Their memberships of between 600 and 1500 are large by most standards, but churches have expensive physical plants and full-time staff rosters numbering from 10 to 20 employees, so they need large memberships to support their infrastructure. Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Cathedral has the smallest membership, somewhat under 500. While membership loss doesn’t threaten any of the churches with closure, it reduces their vitality and energy and reveals some organizational vulnerabilities. Most of these
churches remember the boom years of the 1950s and 1960s, and their identity is closely tied to a certain image of institutional success. St. Paul's Episcopal, for example, is concerned that their membership of about 1500 is below the optimal number needed to support current activities. When boom-year images begin to fade, a long introspective process, such as has been occurring at St. Paul's, may also begin. This is one way for a self-assured elite church to become aware of weaknesses — such as complacency — it may not have acknowledged in the past.

Legacy and its subcultures

A second way ecological perspectives help interpret the identity and shape of the religious district can be seen in the processes of cultural construction and selection. The congregations in a religious district constitute a subculture, of the type that Claude Fischer defines as a "large set of people who share a defining trait, associate with one another, are members of institutions associated with their defining trait, adhere to a distinct set of values, share a set of cultural tools, and take part in a common way of life" (Fischer 1995:544). The contemporary urban environment stimulates the development of many varied subcultures, argues Fischer, rather than the social breakdown and normlessness that Louis Wirth's previously-persuasive theory of urbanism postulated. This process makes city life inherently heterogeneous, yielding many options for unconventionality, from criminal behavior to ethnic and religious enclaving to alternative sexual lifestyles. While Fischer argues that subcultures are loosened from place, specifically from neighborhood or other assumed forms of intimate community, and are formed by self-selecting social networks, he also asserts they are not entirely independent of particular places (Fischer 1982:8; Fischer 1995:547). However, in the case of the religious district, place assumes a larger role than Fischer might acknowledge. Status needs (or mutual interest in status) of these congregations and local residence identified with the cosmopolitan north side of the city help drive their clustering along this particular street. Place, then, is a salient, contributing factor toward the creation of the subculture that this high status religious district constitutes. These congregations share both a territory and a set of differentiated social networks. The Meridian Street district is, therefore, both a set of particular subcultures and an elite urban subculture, both of which are fastened to a single geographic place.

Commuters, race, and class.

The subcultural character of a congregation is determined partly by who comes to it, and as a result, what they bring with them. Place has double importance for a high status religious district — it attracts dispersed members to a congregation because they value the subcultural reinforcement they attain, and
attracts congregations to a centralized location in a decentralized metropolis. All
the congregations except St. Luke’s Catholic attract many, if not most, of their
members from the northern city region and suburbs, especially Carmel in
Hamilton County. Almost all of St. Luke’s members live within the parish
boundaries, primarily encompassing the high-income Meridian Hills section of
the city, making St. Luke’s the wealthiest parish in the Archdiocese of
Indianapolis.

Almost all the churches have been able to cross the regional barriers
between city and suburb. They have been less successful with barriers of class
and slightly more with those of race. Each church within the district is “publicly
limited” by their ability to be a fully accessible congregation because of the
evident class boundary constraints. Geographic boundaries are turned into
symbolic boundaries (Cohen 1985) and a class-based subculture will attract
those who share its traits, thereby reinforcing its subculture (Fischer 1995:555).

Nonetheless, these congregations sometimes make decisions to become non-
exclusive. St. Paul’s records contain a note from the turn of the 20th century in
which the writer worried about the movement of congregations following their
members off the Circle and beyond the mile square: “they must not all move,” he
exclaimed. But the more important question was who would remain and be
welcome at St. Paul’s. With a satisfied flourish the writer concluded, “we shall
not have a ‘fashionable’ congregation (thank God for that!) but we shall always
have the elements of a self-supporting, self-respecting parish.”

Contemporary efforts at incorporating poorer classes into the life of the
churches are focused outwardly on mission activities in economically strapped
neighborhoods. For example, families whose homes have been built through the
congregation’s participation in Habitat for Humanity often visit the church —
providing a symbol of inclusivity — but rarely join the church. The three
Mapleton-Fall Creek churches, Tabernacle Presbyterian, North United
Methodist, and Trinity Episcopal, all “desire to see more neighborhood members
join the church,” in the words of one pastor. But active participation by the
churches in the life of Mapleton-Fall Creek has not turned local residents into
members.

Racial strategies and constraints

The high status religious district does not attract a strongly multiracial
membership, even though several congregations are in or near non-white neigh-
borhoods. Subcultural processes of similarity in wealth, occupation, denomina-
tional history (despite the trend toward free market choice), and aesthetic and
liturgical preferences and taste that include musical as well as the vernacular
language are at work. In the context of the United States and its racialized
history, these processes contribute strongly to making uniracial congregations
(Emerson 2000). One must reach deeper to identify the incentives toward building multiracial congregations, as some congregations have chosen to do.

Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic is the “downtown” church that appeals to urban Catholics with a broadly metropolitan social vision. It is the smallest of the Meridian Street congregations, but is the most racially mixed, being about 20 percent African-American. This is largely the result of the closing of a downtown African-American church, St. Bridget, and the merging of the two parishes, as well as the suburbanization of the white Catholic population. For those remaining, the geographic base of Catholic parishes more easily creates a mixed race congregation. While not all such urban parishes are socially mixed, Sts. Peter and Paul worked deliberately at creating liturgical and institutional inclusion (Becker 1998).

North United Methodist Church is the only other Meridian Street congregation to be moderately racially diverse, with a non-white population of about 10 percent. It was the first among the three Methodist congregations to hire African American staff members. As well, compared to Orthodox and Conservative synagogues, Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation has more racial diversity due to the Reform tradition’s more liberal rules and accessible liturgy leading to attracting and admitting converts, and a somewhat greater tendency to adopt non-white children. Congregational homogeneity is not unique to Indianapolis, as recent national surveys have demonstrated (Emerson 2000), and a variety of historic differences have played their roles.

All the churches have outreach missions that include non-white participants. Most of these activities take place in predominately minority areas of the city. Probably the single largest program particularly targeted to black youth by a white church in Indianapolis that takes place on church grounds is Tabernacle Presbyterian’s year around recreation program, serving 2000 youth annually. About 10 percent of the participants are members of the church, but only about 2 percent of the church’s membership is African-American. Tabernacle is an anchor institution for the Mid-North Church Council, the Mapleton-Fall Creek Neighborhood Association, and a plethora of other service programs specifically supporting Mapleton-Fall Creek. While some staff and lay leadership positions at Tabernacle Presbyterian are held by African-Americans, the bridging process to a fully multiracial membership is not complete.

Religious leadership has long been troubled by continuing racial divisions in American society and by the mainline Protestant churches’ inability to foster multiracial congregations (Emerson 2000; Ammerman 2000). The associate pastor at St. Paul’s acknowledged the irony of continuing segregation within mainline Protestantism one recent Sunday morning, “Despite our activism in civil rights, there is a difference in making statements versus living them.”
Centrality and the public good

Finally, considered as parts of a social ecology, congregations of a religious district are social actors. Owing to their elite status and that of their district, they have both more choices and opportunities, and more constraints than congregations that are less visible.

The historical record for downtown mainline Protestant congregations in Indianapolis demonstrates that they assumed social and civic leadership for the city. As in other American cities, the churches of the elite spoke publicly to the moral and aesthetic issues of a growing population, as well as civic, political, and economic concerns of the day (Bluestone 1995:63-64). These congregations used physical space and an ostentatious architecture to represent their claims to moral and religious authority that imposed (explicit) normative constraints on city life, specifically the norms of the white, business-oriented, middle-class. The early sense of the city as a single moral community was challenged during the twentieth century by forces as various and far-reaching as different streams of domestic and foreign immigration to the city, the assertion of claims by disenfranchised minorities, particularly African Americans, and the changing role of women in public life (Farnsley et al. unpublished manuscript). Despite challenges from various sectors, the centrality of the Meridian Street continues to carry a social and moral presumption that the congregations will speak publicly and to larger city-wide concerns.

All the congregations use the benefits of being located in a high status area — such as a strong and attractive image, social and cultural influence, and the ability to attract high status members — for their own ends. But, what kinds of public activities are enabled by their high status role, and under what circumstances do they participate? In particular, does the saliency of place enhance congregations’ capacity to speak and act to the larger “common good?”

One response by the congregations has been the creation of internal “small publics.” In challenging the loss of the “sacred canopy” chronicled by sociologist Peter Berger (1967), historian Martin Marty (1994:160-162) argues that congregations have never been the self-regarding religious enclaves that Berger accused them of being. While congregations were not willing to be “political” in pursuit of the common good as Berger expected, opting instead for internal organizational vitality, they were public actors mostly in the small, local sense. Members of congregations interacted through openness to encounters with others — some familiar, some strange — in publicly defined spaces — their church buildings. Congregations, in Marty’s view, are inherently public because they are places where people meet each other as they participate in communal teaching, intercessory prayer, and a great variety of missionary work. The Meridian Street congregations are, in one dimension, “small publics” in which a variety of people in many locations, coming from different places, gather willingly to participate in a collective activity — religious expressiveness. But
internal to the notion of public congregations are complexities and
cantrictions that the congregations are in many ways conscious of, particularly
the racial and class homogeneity identified in earlier statements.

But I also consider the more conventional sense of “public,” in which the
main concern is the specific outcomes for residents of a city that a gathering for
religion can produce in terms of outreach and social welfare activities. Activities
intended to produce these outcomes can also be divided into two types: direct
services to the larger community (including the congregation’s members) with
enriching as well as ameliorative activities, and actions, possibly in partnerships,
that focus on systemic social change. These activities have different implications
for the people affected and reflect differently on the congregations that
undertake them.

Social stewardship.

The public dimension of the religious district comes into full view through
the panorama of activities undertaken by these congregations. The financial
resources and social capital of the congregations make a significant impact in
terms of social service. Each of the congregations reports a wide array of
volunteer activities and services, such as free high quality musical concerts,
tutoring projects in Indianapolis public schools and senior citizen and youth
recreation services. Several churches participate in Habitat for Humanity
building and St. Luke’s Methodist and Second Presbyterian are the only
churches in Indianapolis to be “full-house” sponsors (raising the total cost)
during 2001 (Indianapolis Star, Sept. 9, 2001).

Nonetheless, congregations closer to the downtown core are more likely to
do extensive outreach activities (Chaves 1999). One well-known example in
Indianapolis is that of the three churches around Mapleton-Fall Creek —
Tabernacle Presbyterian, North United Methodist, and Trinity Episcopal.
Through the Mid-North Church Council, a multichurch partnership that dates
from 1971, they have formed a stronger bond with churches and organizations in
their adjacent neighborhood than any group in the religious district. This
network includes eight churches and almost a dozen secular as well as faith-
based organizations; several of these were “spun-off” from one of the churches. A
complex web of support and depth in local leadership has enabled the Council
to persevere in its mission of service to the local neighborhood. Meridian Street
United Methodist has a greater internal focus and relatively less involvement in
social outreach than the others. Yet one of Meridian Street Methodist pastors is
on the staff of the Church Federation, valiantly working to keep a weakened
Federation alive with programs supporting city-wide efforts at racial reconc-
ciliation.

A different standard for their public role is beginning to emerge within
several congregations. Having experienced an internal crisis or simply a self-
reflection process, some congregations have restructured their outreach mission beyond a traditional noblesse oblige, saying they no longer want “to be stuck in charity,” as a member of Trinity Episcopal expressed. Another change involves the steps taken by St. Paul’s, derisively called “the icebox church,” to transform an image rooted in class cleavages and in a greater focus on civic activities than intimate fellowship (cf. Becker 1999). This involves changing its internal culture to emphasize caring about one another in ways they formerly did not and some of that caring is extended to thinking about their geographic surroundings. They have noticed that recent new membership comes from the area more proximate to the church, moving them toward becoming more parish-like. As well, they have recently lost some old line generational families because of internal staff troubles and this has stimulated new leadership from among other members. Such shifts portend something about what kind of church they can or want to be, including one that is more multiracial, drawing from two multiracial neighborhoods nearby.

Strategic and limited partnerships for social change.

St. Paul’s Episcopal, by reputation the most conservative of the endowed parishes, has recently undertaken several socially relevant innovations as a result of a wider self-reflection process. Its Endowment committee, which had been disbursing funds widely without requiring members to participate in the services or activities that were supported, recently restructured the terms of their funding decisions. The newly created Endowment Partnership Committee, through which the majority of funds are now channeled, obliges the projects to include members in the programs. By necessity, the members themselves apply for the grants, usually with outside partners, forcing them to take ownership over the types of activities funded.

St. Paul’s is also becoming something of an exception to the general tendency of the north end churches to act separately rather than collaborating in their community service activities. Together with Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Cathedral, St. Paul’s has joined the Indianapolis Partnership for Faith and Community, the newest and most politically progressive of religious community-based groups. The Indianapolis Partnership is a social justice advocacy group that has had difficulty gaining a foothold in the city. A non-Meridian Street pastor pointed out that, except Indianapolis, every mid-size city in the surrounding states has a community organizing presence, including Columbus, Ohio; Louisville, Kentucky and Detroit, Michigan. The widely acknowledged cause is the absence of local funding. Neither the Lilly Endowment nor any of the major churches have ever supported activities based on the community-organizing model. At the same time, the Indianapolis Partnership has chosen not to seek Lilly Endowment funding or develop partnerships with the Mayor’s
office. Their goals are to keep independent programmatic commitments in order to retain a critical voice within the city as a whole.

The involvement of these two churches in community organizing, of course, does not amount to a trend. But it is noteworthy that, for the first time, Trinity Episcopal's endowment committee is considering whether to support ACORN, a community-based justice and advocacy group with branches in many cities. It is also noteworthy that the theme of justice in the face of racism, poverty, government manipulated truth and corrupt law makers was central in a recent sermon by the pastor of First Baptist Church, who then challenged his flock by questioning "What are we going to do about it?"

In contrast to the assumptions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century and the legacy of these that remains today, the membership of the elite congregations do not expect their churches to carry any messages to the city or to be responsible for the city. The members of Second Presbyterian see themselves as "movers and shakers," but their pastor declines to take political positions on the grounds that he recognizes legitimate voices on both sides of any issue. Alternatively, the recently retired pastor of North United Methodist was known as an articulate "public pastor" who had politically progressive views on matters of race, poverty, and social justice. Although he spoke out publicly on a variety of justice concerns, he did not promote a public policy agenda.

CONCLUSION: REPRODUCING THE 'RELIGIOUS DISTRICT'

The actions of the elite congregations and their members are situated in the spatiality of a religious district whose claims to centrality have a long historic record. Attracted by the high status of the district, congregations reproduced their elite status as they jostled each other for space throughout the last 150 years. Their financial and symbolic resources, their prominence and their aesthetics, give these congregations a rich range of choices about what they present to the larger public and what they intend to accomplish. I highlighted the interaction among material and cultural factors in the reproduction of a religious district, addressing the choices congregations made in terms of their internal and external activities and the ways both the congregations and their environments — including the district itself — are shaped by those choices.

For the high status religious district to have continued saliency, its spatiality — like capitalist spatiality in Soja's analysis — must be reinforced, yet changed where necessary (Soja 1985:97). The high status religious district today is composed of congregations doing cultural work that is different from the past. They are self-conscious about their racial and class homogeneity and the boundaries their elite status places between them and other congregations in the city.

While the Meridian Street religious district represents a claim to centrality, it is only one form of space claimed by religious institutions in the ever-changing urban landscape. Significant new church building is occurring not in the
suburban areas, and not in high-status districts, but in other parts of the city of Indianapolis. The largest church campus in Indianapolis is that of an African-American independent Baptist mega church, whose membership (12,000) shows no signs of abating. Another group for which a capital campaign has raised their profile is the Catholic Archdiocese. As a result of a vigorous, public campaign in which the former (and non-Catholic) mayor was honorary chairman, the Archdiocese is rebuilding or remodeling the eight most impoverished parochial schools in the center city despite a declining Catholic population downtown. Both nonwhite and non-mainline congregations in Indianapolis challenge the Meridian Street congregations for leadership and prominence, for public visibility, and new multiplexed forms of centrality.

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