

Indianapolis Collaborative learning is at the heart of a “grand experiment” that has expanded into a statewide resource for faith communities.

Center for Congregations

Faced with the annual task of preparing a Christmas sermon to deliver at Eastview Christian Church in Martinsville, Ind., senior pastor Rick Miller decided to try a bold approach. Rather than research and write the message by himself—his practice for more than a dozen years—he recruited a team of unlikely collaborators: the church youth group. They talked about the challenge of bringing freshness to the familiar nativity story, and then Miller invited the teens to help him come up with something different.

“We created a list of the best-known Christmas films, everything from the *Grinch* to *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and we took a teaching point from each of the movies,” explains Miller. The teens identified brief clips to integrate into the message, linked the visual illustrations to scriptural lessons, and then organized the material into a thoughtful package.

The joint effort earned rave reviews from the

congregation, including the youth. “I never saw kids pay so much attention to a sermon,” says Miller, who attributes their interest to the fact that “they had some skin in the game.”

The idea of soliciting input from his youthful parishioners came to Miller after attending a seminar called “Better Preaching & Better Listening: Clergy and Laity Explore Preaching Together,” sponsored by the Indianapolis Center for Congregations (ICC). The four-part learning series, led by two professors from Christian Theological Seminary, required each participating pastor to bring a delegation of lay members to the sessions. “That was the hook for me,” explains Miller. “I’ve been at Eastview Church for 13 years, and I’ve wondered from time to time if my preaching is still effective. I knew the seminar would be interactive and that my members would tell me the truth.”



The sessions proved beneficial to both the clergy and the lay leaders. "It pulled back the curtain to reveal what goes through preachers' minds when they prepare their messages," says Miller.

Side-by-side learning

The "Better Preaching" series is among hundreds of learning opportunities that ICC has sponsored since it was launched in 1996 by the Alban Institute with Lilly Endowment encouragement and support. Over the years the center has developed a distinctive way of helping local faith communities address pressing concerns and take advantage of new opportunities to strengthen their ministries.

Rather than telling congregations what to do, the center connects them with outside resources, engages them in consultations and educational events, and provides matching grants that, together, help them build their own capacities to practice their faith more imaginatively and serve their neighbors and surrounding communities more effectively.

The more than 300,000 congregations scattered across the country are resources of social and intellectual capital and often the spark of civic improvement efforts. The Indiana University Center on Philanthropy reports that persons who are active members of religious congregations give and volunteer more than others for charitable causes in their communities. Thus vibrant and effective congregations not only enrich the faith lives of their members, they also play an important role in fostering civic vitality.

Expanding connections

The center originally limited its services to congregations within an eight-county region in Central Indiana. Recent Endowment grants have enabled ICC to expand its reach, first to Fort Wayne in 2003 and this year to congregations in and around Evansville. "Now we plan to broaden the Central Indiana region to include 33 counties that stretch from Indiana's east to west boundaries," says Timothy Shapiro, ICC president. "In the next two or three years we hope to make our services available to any Indiana congregation that considers them helpful."

Shapiro and his staff have developed an expansion strategy that begins with exploratory meetings within a region and progresses to small workshops on topics that local congregations request. As interest

and awareness grow, ICC sponsors a large one-day conference called "Flourishing Congregations" that introduces clergy and lay leaders to activities and tools to strengthen their ministries. This year's Fort Wayne event attracted 252 registrants from 64 congregations; the Evansville conference drew 164 members from 42 congregations.

"I visited several ministerial associations and told our story," says Wendy McCormick, director of the center's satellite office in Evansville and former co-pastor of that city's First Presbyterian Church. "I explained how the center can help by identifying resources for clergy and congregations who are looking for solutions to their challenges. As a pastor myself, I remember how much time I used to spend putting out fires and dealing with what we called the 'crisis du jour.' I tell people that the center can do a lot of the legwork for pastoral staffs that are pressed for time."

Creating learning communities

A positive result of ICC's activities has been the formation of statewide learning communities. Congregations that previously had little interaction with each other find themselves working together as they attempt to achieve similar goals. The four major grant initiatives ICC has sponsored all have involved collaborative learning opportunities for the participating congregations and their leaders. Each initiative included at least 30 congregations.

Ministers and lay leaders attend seminars like this one on "Better Preaching & Better Listening" at the Center for Congregations in downtown Indianapolis. The Rev. Rick Miller (*opposite*), senior pastor at Eastview Christian Church in Martinsville, describes a new approach to a Christmas sermon. Congregation leaders like Diane Patton (*above*) from Horizons of Faith United Methodist Church in Indianapolis are active participants in the four-part seminar.



Two of these initiatives explored the use of computers in ministry; another initiative called "Sacred Spaces" centered on designing appropriate worship facilities; and the fourth one, "Life Together—Thinking and Acting Strategically," is helping congregations create and implement strategic plans.

Whereas major initiatives such as "Life Together" promote structured interaction, one-time workshops encourage informal networking. With offices in Indianapolis, Fort Wayne and Evansville in place, ICC can bring out-of-state experts to Indiana to lead the same workshop at different locations. Participants can enroll in whatever session fits their schedules. This flexibility results in a new mix of people at every event, according to Shapiro. "As an example, a pastor from Fort Wayne can talk with a colleague from Indianapolis about a workshop they both experienced, even though they didn't attend at the same place or on the same date."

Sharing the lessons

Among the key lessons that ICC has learned is that no two faith communities are the same. Just as their concerns vary, so do the solutions. Congregations may share similarities—location, size, denomination and traditions—but each is unique. "We have learned that 'best practices' often becomes a misnomer," says Shapiro. "The kind of resources that fit one congregation may not succeed in another environment." ICC believes that a congregation learns best when it blends outside expertise with its own creativity and designs a course of action tailored to its unique situation.

Many of these lessons have been captured and disseminated in a variety of forms. Alban Institute

has published books that ICC staff members wrote about two of the center's major grant initiatives—*40 Days @ 40 Bytes* (about computers and ministry) and *Holy Places: Matching Sacred with Mission* from the "Sacred Spaces" initiative.

Alban also produces the online Congregational Resource Guide (www.congregationalresources.org), which shares information gleaned from ICC research and consulting activities with a worldwide audience. Last year the site received over 750,000 visits from congregational leaders eager to find the best resources available, as well as advice on how to use them well. Also, the center's own newsletters, educational DVDs and the ICC Web site keep clergy and laity up to date on the center's work.

Serving God and neighbors

Increasingly congregations ask the center for advice on reaching out into their communities. "Several years ago we described our work as helping congregations with their pressing practical problems," says Shapiro. "Now more and more often congregations call about long-term strategic issues and ways to live out their most fundamental purposes—to love God and serve their neighbors."

As congregations learn, grow and flourish, so does their impact on their members and on the larger communities of which they are a part. Daniel F. Evans Jr. is a lifelong member of Meridian Street United Methodist Church in Indianapolis as well as the president and CEO of Clarian Health, Indiana's largest health-care system. A key local and national leader on many civic and health-care issues, Evans puts the matter this way: "My faith and my congregation are crucial anchors in my life. They shape who I am and are a key source of my most fundamental commitments. That's true for millions of people in our country. Congregations matter to a community's quality of life—and so do organizations like the Indianapolis Center for Congregations that help them thrive."



The Rev. Karen Powell, systems analyst turned minister, represents Muncie's Riverside United Methodist Church and makes a point during an ICC program. Besides good discussion, the seminars offer fellowship and friendship.
