



Religion

Division

(opposite) The Rev. Cheryl Garbe of the Morgantown (Ind.) United Methodist Church greets Brent Bill (left) and Timothy Shapiro from the Indianapolis Center for Congregations. The church leveraged a \$30,000 grant from the center's Sacred Spaces Grants Initiative into a \$97,000 project. Especially sensitive to the needs of the physically handicapped, they added four new accessible restrooms, a new "walker friendly" back entrance, and other amenities.

(below) Pushpins dot the map of the "far-flung" members of the congregation of Indianapolis' Central Christian Church.

A Grand Experiment Comes of Age

Indianapolis Center for Congregations

Tucked in the corner of Central Christian Church's Fellowship Hall is an easel that displays an Indiana map studded with colorful pushpins.

The pins show the geographic location of the church's widely scattered members. A small cluster represents the walkers – those inner-city residents who live within steps of the 113-year-old sanctuary. Other pins, placed as far away as Westfield to the north and Nashville to the south, indicate commuters who drive 30-plus miles to downtown Indianapolis to worship in the historic space. Once 2,000 members strong, the congregation now numbers about 170. But it's growing again – as the pins confirm.

"The unifying factor is that our people want to worship in a place where not everybody looks like they do," says the Rev. Linda McCrae, pastor of this Disciples of Christ congregation since 2002. "Diversity is very much a part of our identity. Our uniqueness is that we minister in an urban setting with all the social realities that go with that situation. We reach out and cross dividing lines that human beings often create."

When the church embarked on its revitalization effort several years ago, it tapped into the resources of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations (ICC), an organization supported by Lilly Endowment funds and designed to

help faith communities identify their needs and address their concerns. A leadership team from Central Christian Church attended a series of ICC-sponsored classes aimed at congregations in transition and then sought suggestions on how to create a more welcoming environment. Most

recently the church participated in ICC's Sacred Spaces Grants Initiative, a program that invited area congregations to apply for matching funds to improve their worship spaces. The goal of the initiative was to help congregations upgrade their facilities to better reflect their heritages, accommodate their members and support their ministries.

"The ICC never tells you what to do," emphasizes McCrae, whose congregation will use its \$30,000 ICC grant to "spruce up" Fellowship Hall and hire an architect to assess

the structural condition of the vintage building. "The center's consultants don't pretend to have all the answers; instead, they outline a process that a congregation can use to figure out its mission." Based on that mission, the congregation determines what changes to make so its facility – its "sacred space" – supports the mission. "Everything is tied to mission, which is bedrock," says McCrae.



Walking in tandem

Now in its ninth year, ICC is a “grand experiment” that has come of age, according to its founders. “We started out with a picture of a place where congregations could go to learn how to be stronger and healthier,” recalls James P. Wind, president of the Alban Institute, the Virginia-based organization that launched the center in 1997 with a \$5.3 million Endowment grant. Because no model existed for such a project, a series of questions helped guide Wind and his colleagues in bringing this “picture” into sharp focus.

“The Endowment encouraged us to ask, ‘What if the center made no attempt to tell congregations what to do but rather invited congregations to share the challenges, issues and programs they were working on or hoped to tackle in the future?’” says John Wimmer, ICC’s founding director, who collaborated with Wind in refining the center’s approach to service. “What if the center then assisted congregations in finding and using the best resources available – from across town or around the nation – to address the needs that the congregations identified?”

Much more than a lending library or referral agency, ICC has developed into a full-service organization that walks alongside congregations as they experience growth spurts, leadership changes, budget woes, shifting demographics and other challenges that accompany ministry in the 21st century. Since opening its doors, the center has assisted area clergy and lay leaders in three ways:

§ by hosting more than 300 educational events ranging from small roundtable discussions to a three-day conference on worship styles that drew delegations from 109 congregations representing some 30 denominations;

§ by connecting 1,200 congregations with outside resources – consultants, facilitators, printed materials – that complement and expand on the strengths already present within the faith community; and

§ by awarding 375 grants to enable congregations to gain access to the resources they need or implement the plans they create as they work to streamline and strengthen their ministries.

Because the center is intentional about building ongoing relationships with the congregations it serves, staff members welcome progress reports and follow-up calls from the field. These often include new requests for assistance, especially if a congregation was pleased with the results of its initial contact. “For example, a congregation may first ask our help in designing a strategic plan to reach out to its neighborhood,” says Timothy Shapiro, ICC president since 2003. “The next year that same congregation may call us with the good news that the outreach has been so effective that members are considering a building expansion. Now they ask for our recommendation on identifying an architect.”

Although requests for help tend to fall into familiar categories, Shapiro insists that “every case is different, even if it is on a subject that we’ve addressed a hundred times.” Issues related to stewardship, capital campaigns and congregational vitality are common, but occasionally a phone call prompts the ICC staff to explore new ground as it attempts to assist a congregation with a one-of-a-kind situation.

Neighbor to neighbor

This was the case when members of Debre Selam Kidus Mikael Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Tewahido) approached the center for help in securing a permanent worship home. Since its founding four years earlier, the church had conducted services in a borrowed chapel, a funeral home and a motel conference room. “We had nothing,” recalls Tesfaye Temesgen. “We were desperate to find a room that we could use for one day a week.”

Instead, they located a sturdy brick building that was



☛ (above) *The Rev. Linda McCrae (center) of Indianapolis’ Central Christian Church discusses items donated for the church’s Thrift Shop with volunteers Carol Nickel (left) and Jeanne Ravaux-Newburg.*

(opposite) *A new dome perched atop a sturdy brick building, hard by I-70 in downtown Indianapolis, announces the presence of the congregation of the Debre Selam Kidus Mikael Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Tewahido).*

for sale on the south side of Indianapolis. Deciding to purchase the vacant property was the easy part; the challenge came in demystifying unfamiliar laws and meeting the many requirements stipulated by the real estate contract. They turned to ICC staff member Nancy Armstrong for advice on hiring an attorney to guide them through a building inspection and secure a debt agreement with favorable terms. “Every time we had a problem, we would call Nancy,” says Mesfin Kebede, chairman of the church board.

Now comfortably settled in their church home, members continue to add touches that make the worship space uniquely theirs. An Ethiopian cross, oversized drums, embroidered umbrellas and the three-colored flag of their native country are present in the sanctuary. Outside, an onion dome is mounted over the door as a visible symbol of the historic faith practiced inside. A gift of several pews, brokered through the ICC, has improved the seating capacity of the building.

“The church is growing,” says Dawit Melese, one of the congregation’s founders. “We wanted the pews because we hope to expand in the future.” The seating became available when the Etz Chaim Sephardic congregation, recipient of an ICC Sacred Spaces grant, built a new synagogue on the north side of Indianapolis to replace its previous home in a renovated Lutheran church. A member of the Sephardic congregation contacted ICC with the offer to donate the pews after the synagogue determined it no longer needed them. A phone call or two later and the transfer between faith communities was finalized.

“This is a great congregation-to-congregation story,” says Armstrong. “Within the same city these pews have been shared by a Protestant, a Jewish and an Orthodox congregation.”

Tracking the trends

One way that ICC staff members keep abreast of what’s going on within the city’s congregations is by making detailed notes about their conversations with clergy and lay leaders. Brent Bill, ICC’s executive vice president, is the “gatekeeper,” the first contact for persons calling the center. Bill listens to callers’ concerns and then refers them to his colleagues for assistance. He keeps a running tally of the issues that prompt the calls and, at the end of each year, is able to report on the volume of calls dealing with each issue. In response to these statistics, ICC may host an educational event planned around an issue of concern. Occasionally a topic will generate so much interest that the ICC will use it as the basis of a grants program.

“Our Computers and Ministry Grants Initiative started as a workshop,” recalls Bill. “People attended the workshop




to learn how to integrate technology into their ministries. The problem was that many of the congregations lacked the money to buy the hardware and software that their churches needed. We thought, ‘What if we could make funds available to them as part of a grants program?’”

The staff designed a series of seminars and invited area congregations to apply to participate. More than 200 expressed interest; 90 applied, and 62 were selected. Based on the classes and on-site consultations, teams from participating congregations developed technology plans that became the basis for implementation grants. So successful was the program that in 2004 ICC introduced its second major grants initiative, the \$1.5 million Sacred Spaces Grants Initiative, to help congregations confront challenges linked to their facilities.

In an effort to share the lessons learned from these two major grants programs, ICC has produced several resources that have found an audience far beyond Indianapolis. The first, a how-to manual called *40 Days & 40 Bytes*, is published by the Alban Institute and offers tips on putting technology to work in church settings. The second resulted from the Sacred Spaces Grants Initiative and took the form of a two-day conference that featured workshops and presentations by theologians, architects, strategic planners and historic preservationists. A DVD and a study guide, distributed at the conference and available from ICC, explain the three-phase process that a congregation might use as it contemplates a building project.

A time to grow

Since its founding, ICC has undergone three evaluations to determine how well it is meeting the needs of its constituents. The most recent study, completed this year by a California-based company, offered feedback that Shapiro described as “exactly what we had hoped.” Interviews with

 (below) *A young girl takes a “prayer break” during services at the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Indianapolis. One of the oldest of all traditions of Eastern Christianity, the church has at least three separate bodies with their own administrations in Addis Ababa, Jerusalem and North America.*

congregational representatives yielded comments such as:

§ “ICC saves congregations like ours a lot of time and legwork.”

§ “ICC shares information and empowers callers to find their own answers.”

§ “ICC won’t come in and attempt to ‘fix’ a church; instead, it supports what is consistent with the church’s mission.”

§ “ICC consultants don’t push programs on us; they listen and find out what it is that we’re looking for.”

Encouraged by the study’s findings, Shapiro and his staff are in the process of expanding ICC’s services to four geographic regions within Indiana. In keeping with the philosophy of the center, they have set no rigid goals for the proposed satellite offices and aren’t making assumptions that a program that is appropriate for one area is sure to succeed in another. The first office will open in the northeast corner of the state and “though in many ways it will

replicate our Indianapolis model, it will take on its own character and reflect congregational life as it is in the region where it is located,” says Shapiro. He views the expansion as an “exploratory venture” that will evolve according to local needs.

Although the proposed network of centers was not in the plan when ICC was conceived nine years ago, the idea doesn’t surprise its founders. “As the idea for the center has come to life, we’ve discovered larger possibilities in almost every part of it,” says Wind. “We’ve learned a lot about how to provide resources and assemble peers to work together on issues. At every step along the way, we’ve reflected, evaluated and then made changes to improve what we do. At the core of our work has always been a relentless desire to learn about congregations and to discover how best to help them. After almost a decade, we’re seeing the results of those efforts.”



CRG: The 'go-to place' for church leaders

Among Nancy DeMott's early assignments after joining the Indianapolis Center for Congregations (ICC) in 1997 as its first staff member was to collaborate with colleagues at the Alban Institute in developing a one-of-a-kind database of resources. "Right from the beginning, the Endowment encouraged Alban and the Indianapolis center to work together to find a way of sharing what ICC was learning about resources that are helpful to congregations," recalls DeMott, currently the center's director of resources.

The Alban-ICC project team built its preliminary database around well-researched lists generated at Alban headquarters in Virginia and the ICC office in Indiana. These lists included resources that Alban suggested in response to members' most frequently asked questions and materials that the ICC staff recommended to participants at its various educational events. As technology evolved and lists lengthened, Alban and ICC, with Lilly Endowment funding, grew the once-modest database into a Web site that has become "the go-to place for congregational leaders who want quick access to helpful information," according to James P. Wind, president of Alban.

Since going "live" on the Internet in February 2000, the Congregational Resource Guide, CRG for short or www.congregationalresources.org in cyberspace, has grown into a diverse and interactive community of clergy and lay leaders who peruse recommendations, gain access to reviews, sign up for tutorials and download articles and special reports. Visitors to the Web site – more than 35,000 each month – can comment on featured segments and request additional ones.

"We've become more sophisticated about tracking what subjects people are looking for," says Ian Evison, director of research at Alban, project director for CRG and, with DeMott, one of the original members of the joint project team. The three most-requested topics this year were congregational vitality, leadership and administration. Perennial categories of interest include spirituality, worship and conflict resolution.

"We constantly renew the front page to include up-to-date information," says Anne Van Dusen, senior research

associate at Alban. "For example, churches in 2005 were very interested in resources about Islam. After the tsunami, the hurricanes here and the earthquake in Pakistan, they wanted to know where they could make donations."

A new feature, set to debut in 2006, will invite "wise voices" – experts in specific fields – to write essays, participate in interviews and join in conversations about timely topics. By facilitating these discussions, CRG will assume a new role. "CRG won't be a solo 'expert' putting the information out there," explains Van Dusen. "We'll become more of a collector and integrator, sifting through and pulling together the best information and then making it available to users."

getting through the maze

It's this "sifting through" service that church leaders seem to appreciate the most, believes Wind. "The abundance of information on the Internet is astonishing," he says. "Congregations struggle to sort through the maze and find what's right for them." Diverse organizations are spreading the message that CRG is well equipped to navigate the maze. At last count, 807 Web sites offered links to CRG. These include individual churches, seminaries, denominational offices, libraries and judicatory resources centers.

"We know that many groups face issues that aren't tied to denomination or geography," says Wind. Questions about raising funds, managing growth, stemming attrition and training leaders are universal. "All kinds of border crossings and shared learning need to occur. We want Alban, the Indianapolis center and CRG to be places that are useful to a wide variety of American congregations."