

# Presentation: A Tale of Two Congregations: Part Two

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What would it look like if the church in creative ways became the locus for imagining and creating good work in its neighborhood?

This and the previous post by Phil Kenneson make explicit how congregations and parishes might serve as the primary context in which we reframe and reshape Christian imagination about and engagement in our daily work.

**A Congregation of “Good Work.”** I want next to turn our attention to a congregation that is seeking, among other aspects of its missional life, to encourage and support “good work.” I want to tell a bit of their story not because they have it all figured out; they would be the first to admit that they don’t. But they have been seeking for several decades to live more fully into God’s mission in and for their neighborhood, and I believe their example might encourage us and stir our imaginations.

This church in Indianapolis began in the late 1800s and grew quickly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the point that, around 1970 (and before the notion of “mega-churches” was commonplace), it was a congregation of about 1100 people. In fact, it was one of the largest in the country at the time. I won’t rehearse their whole history, but like a lot of cities, the demographics shifted over time as many families moved out of city. In response, a lot of city churches moved their congregations to the suburbs. This particular congregation remained, though shrinking in membership to about 250 members while being viewed as a mission outpost for the suburban churches. As a result of this well-documented “white flight” that took place across urban landscapes all across the United States during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this congregation found itself in what was widely regarded as a blighted neighborhood, surrounded by neglected and abandoned property.

**Deciding to Remain in the City.** The congregation’s decision to remain and be a presence there was not an easy one. What would it mean to remain? Who were they now? What was their identity? What they soon became was a service agency. Suburban churches would come in on weekends and do service projects. They had a food pantry, a furniture pantry, and a clothes pantry where urban residents could receive second-hand cast-offs from their now distant suburban neighbors. The church was full of old furniture and clothes. What the congregation realized over time was that this “service agency” mentality was not really helping their neighborhood, nor was it really bringing a greater measure of wholeness and life to anyone involved.

At this point, the congregation made the important decision to step back and ask themselves some hard questions. They realized they needed to make space for a serious conversation about who the

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church is called to be and who God was calling them to be as a congregation there in that specific place. Decades ago it was commonplace for churches to have Sunday evening services. This congregation decided that this Sunday evening time was probably the best opportunity they had to gather and talk as a family. So 20 years ago they began a conversation every Sunday night about the nature of the church, about who they were, and about who they were called to be, and about what it might mean to live out the gospel incarnationally in that particular place. That Sunday night conversation continues today.

We should not romanticize this weekly conversation. It was hard and contentious. They lost a number of members. When they started asking fundamental questions about the Christian faith, they discovered that they didn't actually agree about matters they had always assumed they did agree about. As the conversations continued and got more difficult, they worked diligently to be open and honest with one another, but there was no denying it: this was hard, even painful at times. Over time, they began to come to a consensus about their God-given calling: God was calling them to be a part of God's mission and to be a sign, a foretaste, an outpost of God's reign in that neighborhood. They began to ask questions about what that might look like. And they began to ask what it would look like if they really believed that God had given them all the gifts they needed to be faithful co-workers with God in that place.

**Paying Attention.** The congregation was down to about 180 members at this point, a small congregation by most standards. The first thing they did was to pay attention to what was right in front of them. They began to notice, for example, that they were in a neighborhood that itself had many gifts even though very few people recognized them as such. Nearly everyone thought of it as a blighted part of the city with little or nothing to offer. So they began a number of initiatives they hoped would help them begin to see their neighbors and their neighborhood differently. They held neighborhood meetings, listening and taking inventory of the manifold gifts around them. Rather than hiring a youth minister as their second staff person, they hired a member of their congregation who was savvy when it came to construction, hiring him as a development organizer. And they started a non-profit Community Development Corporation(CDC).

Their focus was on paying attention to what God was already doing and what gifts God had already given them. They realized they had a woman in the congregation who was living on minimum wage and was going to be evicted from her house. There were eighteen people in her household, including a number of neighborhood children she had taken in. The congregation asked themselves: What gifts, what assets do we have as a congregation to address this situation? After deliberation, they took one of the abandoned houses near the church, moved out the furniture being stored there, and completely renovated the house. The woman and her family moved into what was essentially a brand new house. And then they realized two things: one, that there were all kinds of people in the neighborhood who needed better housing; and two, that all these run-down properties in the neighborhood that before had seemed liked problems, now appeared as assets. So they began to see part of their mission of shalom-making as providing good housing and providing good work for people in repairing and refurbishing houses in their neighborhood.

**Utilizing God's Gifts to Develop a Neighborhood.** Over the years they have completely refurbished and remodeled 40 houses within a two block area of the church. As a result, more and more members of the congregation began moving into the neighborhood immediately surrounding the church property. Today, about three-fourths of the congregation lives within a two-block radius of the church, mostly on two nearby streets. Together they want to be God's presence, an incarnational presence, in that neighborhood. And that they are. They have also done repairs on over 200 additional houses in the neighborhood, with the CDC serving as an employer, offering people an opportunity to enhance their skills and the opportunity to do meaningful work.

The church was also gifted a few years ago with an old school which sits adjacent to its property. Considerable resources were devoted to transforming the former school into much-needed housing; it now contains 36 units of mixed income apartments. Some tenants pay above market price, some pay market price, and some low-income tenants pay below market price, all living together in the same space. They have also refurbished another nearby building, creating 30 affordable senior apartment units. These environmentally conscious apartments are projected to generate more energy than they use.

One final aspect of this congregation's creative foray into neighborhood housing is worth noting. Not only has the congregation provided housing and opportunities for meaningful work to their neighbors, but because these properties are owned by the CDC, they also control the cost of this housing to insure it remains affordable. Likewise, they have control over who their tenants are, insuring it continues to be a mixed neighborhood and thereby resisting the gentrification of the neighborhood.

In addition to housing, the congregation has also been a force for good in the neighborhood when it comes to education. Years ago, two women in the congregation decided they would like better daycare and Pre-K options for their children. There were a lot of young working mothers in the neighborhood and there were limited options for their children. Because the church had this huge building, most of it being unused throughout the week, the women asked if they could borrow a room so they could teach their children and other neighborhood children. And so they did. Over time, they have grown to become one of the top early childhood programs in Indianapolis, serving over 200 children every day. They also employ 40 people full-time with only about ten being from the church. Even though churches who run such programs are not required to be licensed in Indiana, the program voluntarily meets all state regulations and all their teachers are licensed. They also seek to be a good neighbor by offering enrichment opportunities for children enrolled in the preschool. For example, recently they took 100 of those children on a three-day camping trip. This outing not only gave parents a much-needed break, but also offered a lot of these urban children their first opportunity to experience nature in this way.

This congregation for many years, through its CDC, has also run a mowing service, cutting lawns and landscaping a number of city parks. This small business allowed them to hire low-skilled workers and offer them a living wage. They also have a robust bookkeeping business that serves primarily non-profits. In each case, they think about and practice the economic side of things very unconventionally. When you are hired you have a frank and open conversation about how much

you need to earn to live. And then they try to meet that. So people working the same jobs do not necessarily make the same amount. Some workers actually earn more than their supervisors. And income levels and salaries can fluctuate over time, depending upon current financial obligations. So if employees have student loans to pay off they might make more until they pay them off, at which time they may agree to take a reduction in pay to support others. This counter-cultural approach to economics focuses attention on how much people need and not on finding your identity and worth in your annual income. Such an approach is rooted in trust, since you are simply asked to be honest about how much you really need to live; no one checks up on you.

**Becoming an Instrument of God's Shalom.** This posture of trust and risk is also displayed in the congregation's willingness to dream boldly about how they might be an instrument of God's work of shalom in their neighborhood. The congregation is not afraid of short-term failure and not every venture they have started has been a success. On the East side of the city there are a lot of old, abandoned factories. One such location nearby was used in the past to make batteries and so the ground on which the site sits is completely contaminated. Rather than simply seeing this as a problem, the congregation has chosen to view the site as an asset and has thought creatively about how to use it for the good of their neighbors. Because this part of the city is a functional food desert with little or no healthy food available nearby, members in the congregation have started growing hydroponic vegetables in this old factory, with vegetables raised in this way growing in a liquid solution rather than soil. In this way, the congregation is seeking to provide their neighbors healthy food at an affordable price while at the same time redeeming a piece of property that for many years was little more than a visible scar, a daily reminder of how their neighborhood had been abandoned. But this project is not without its own risks. The money raised for this venture came from families in the church taking out mortgages on their own homes. These loans have been run through the CDC, and so these families will never make a profit from this venture (that was not the point), but will at best have their loans repaid over time. But there is, of course, the real possibility that this venture will fail and their loans will not be repaid. They are taking a real risk in making available the resources entrusted to them for the good of their neighbors. They are a people living on the edge, not afraid to trust God and not afraid to try things that might fail.

**Making a Difference.** This relatively small congregation is making an enormous difference on the East side of Indianapolis. You can't live in that part of town and not know about this congregation, but few people outside their little corner of the world know anything about them. They are the first to say they are not doing this work by themselves; rather, they are always seeking to partner with other community organizations in the area. They are very much in conversation with their neighborhood, trying to be good neighbors rather than saviors. They are here for the duration, not coming in on weekends and then going out to the suburbs to live. This church is a real sign of the kingdom, leading people do ask, "Why are you here?" "Why are you doing this?" This is a most fruitful dynamic within which to talk about the good news of Jesus Christ.

This congregation doesn't like to talk about themselves and they are nervous when people try to hold them up as a model for anything. They are simply trying, day after day, to be faithful to their calling to be an agent of God's life-giving Spirit in their surrounding neighborhood. But even so, there is a lot about their embodied life that can stir our imaginations. They are, by God's grace, a

beautiful incarnational presence in that neighborhood. They help people of all ages recognize their gifts and then help them put them to work, using them in life-giving ways. Their approach to ministry and service always begins with what God has already given them rather than in terms of what they might feel compelled to do. They are constantly asking: If God really has given us everything we need, indeed, an *abundance—more than what we need*—here in this place, how do we best use those gifts to join God’s mission in the world?

**How did they come to this transformation?** The congregation was influenced by early rumblings in the missional church conversation. They also, early on, were a part of the [Ekklesia Project](#), a network of pastors, scholars, laypeople, and congregations seeking to learn from one another how best to live out the gospel in our time. They also had other friends who were helping them think theologically about the nature of the church, including intentional communities around the country such as the Bruderhof, and the Center for Parish Development. They are deep learners, who are willing to learn and then risk putting that learning into action in order to keep learning how to be kingdom people. They take scripture seriously in their life together, once devoting a year studying the book of Ephesians, imagining together what it might mean for the daily lived experience of their congregation if God really was through the church making known the manifold wisdom of God. They believe that is what they have been called to do, to be used by God to bear witness to God’s desires for all of creation. They are still meeting every Sunday night, engaging in their ongoing conversation and discernment, and this conversation is always open to anyone who wants to participate. Their life together is organic, slow, and messy. Yet as noted above, the way they seek to be the church has real life implications for every sphere of life, including the shape of daily work, and those thoughtful decisions and practices have a shalom-making ripple effect across their congregation and into their local neighborhood and community. My hope and prayer is that in sharing a bit of their story, we all might be inspired to seek ways to live out God’s call to be a foretaste of God’s kingdom in our own neighborhoods, seeking creative ways to be used by God’s Spirit to bring a greater measure of healing and wholeness to a broken world.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the pros and the cons of a “service agency” mentality?
2. How did the Sunday night conversations make a difference when the congregation began paying attention to their neighborhood?
3. How did paying attention to God’s gifts within their neighborhood differ from a service agency approach?
4. In what ways has this congregation become a foretaste and instrument of God’s reign?
5. What are some initial steps your congregation could take to become a “congregation of good work”?