



*Religion and
Social Welfare
in Indianapolis,
1929–2002*

a public charity

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Episcopal established Cathedral House "to serve many of the less fortunate families living within a 10-block area near the downtown church."²⁷ Cathedral House offered religious services for children and a kindergarten. Just six years later, the congregation's concerns toward the social needs of the neighborhood had changed dramatically. Christ Episcopal played a central role in the formation of Episcopal Community Services (ECS), at 1557 Central Street, that offered emergency food, after-school tutorials, a job service program, and a clothing pantry. In addition to its fifty regular volunteer workers, Episcopal Community Services had a paid staff of five, including a full-time psychiatrist and a social caseworker.²⁸ ECS, like most Episcopal initiatives across the nation, was constrained by the fact that "the church has an easier time trying to abate poverty through direct service rather than dealing with issues of race and class as causal factors." Still, Christ Episcopal congregants did move beyond former evangelical goals and learn that the city had problems the church could not ignore.²⁹ Canon Frank V. H. Carthy, the executive director, suggested ECS was not simply a traditional charity. "We're not a do-good organization. We're here to meet the emotional and physical needs of people."³⁰

Not all churches that relocated to suburbs broke all ties to the city. When First Presbyterian moved from downtown and merged with Meridian Heights Presbyterian Church at 47th and Central Street, it retained ownership of its former building—renamed Metro Church—to provide social services to the neighborhood whose residents had never been members. With assistance from the Presbytery, Metro Church thrived. It offered day care and a clothing bank as well as mental health services. Metro Center also welcomed secular groups such as the Welfare Rights Organization to meet in its building.³¹

Fletcher Place Church, in contrast to Christ Episcopal and Metro Church, was a historic "urban church" which had always had a strong social mission. Since the early twentieth century it had offered social, educational, and health programs to nonmembers at the **Fletcher Place** Community Center. When Miller **Newton** became head pastor in 1963, he transformed **Fletcher Place** into one of Indianapolis's most politically active, progressive urban churches.

Newton recognized the importance of health clinics, gymnasiums, and day nurseries, but he also brought neighborhood residents, among the poorest in the city, together to speak out and organize. This was particularly important for Fletcher Place Church, whose neighborhood, populated by poor whites with Appalachian roots, suffered from “high [levels of] crime and juvenile delinquency” as well as “high unemployment.”³² Neighborhood residents did not have access to political resources and had become alienated from religious institutions. In addition to participating in city-wide conflicts over the War on Poverty, Newton reached out to his neighbors. He went to what he called the “natural meeting places of life—homes, service stations, soda shops, and to street corners—” to learn about the people in his community.³³ Newton created the Outpost, a storefront church in a tough area of his southeast neighborhood, where he conducted “informal meetings,” or “conversations” as he called them, rather than church services.³⁴ At the Outpost, Newton hoped men and women would voice their perspectives, find a place within the church, and nurture the political will to challenge inequalities and injustices. Some residents did, in fact, form neighborhood block groups and protest slum housing and poor health inspections.³⁵

Thus, Indianapolis’s most prominent Episcopal church and two of its oldest Presbyterian and Methodist churches were among the earliest proponents of urban ministry, like liberal Protestants across the nation. Some conservative Protestants, however, also focused on the city to address pressing urban issues, though their framing of and solutions for the problems diverged from those of their liberal counterparts.

In Indianapolis, the Salvation Army encouraged the development of the Shack, an urban ministry for teenagers. Salvation Army members saw how the enticing secular culture lured Indianapolis’s teenagers more effectively than did churches. But instead of lamenting the waywardness of youth and the corrupting influence of the larger culture, the Shack adapted the secular adolescent culture to its own evangelical principles and goals to attract the young. The Shack employed a young staff hip to teen pop culture and skilled at employing popular cultural images within a conservative religious

framework. The Shack sponsored dances, played rock and roll, and had a pool table. The recreational rooms at the Shack's center as well as the Shack's bus, used to transport kids to summer outings, were painted in psychedelic colors. When asked why teens came to the Shack, one worker explained how the center was known as a psychedelic and "swinging" place. Some Salvation Army members who "frowned on the dancing and some of the other activities" initially expressed concern, but the Shack's success muted critical voices.³⁶ In the summer of 1971, 360 teens were regular members. Along with the staff, they helped make the Shack an integral part of Stringtown, conducting neighborhood clean-ups, providing job counseling and placement, and sponsoring recreational activities.

The involvement of the Shack, Christ Episcopal, Metro Church, and Fletcher Place in urban ministries demonstrated the theological and political diversity of the movement. They all, however, identified strongly with their neighborhoods. Both the Shack and the Outpost were vocal about neighborhood boundaries, communicating their missions to serve residents. They sent out weekly newsletters to every home in their respective neighborhoods with information about their centers. In addition, the Fletcher Place Community Center required that staff "live in the community area."³⁷ The Shack had no such residential requirement, but its leaders were nonetheless proud that "the majority [of its paid staff] is from the neighborhood."³⁸ Although Cathedral House did not restrict its services to those in the immediate neighborhood, it did consider the area around 16th and Central Street as its "area of most intense social service."³⁹

Community organizations quickly learned the importance of identifying with and understanding their neighborhoods. When the Presbyterian Mayer Chapel decided to develop an urban focus in 1962, it asked the Community Service Council to conduct a study of its southeastside neighborhood. In response to that study, Mayer conducted its own house-to-house survey to get "to know more intimately the families served and a plan to meet their needs."⁴⁰ Ten years later Mayer's thriving center included health clinics, a Planned Parenthood, and a Welfare Rights Organization. Mayer was not unique. When the Assumption Catholic Church sought a