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*“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”*

## **CONGREGATIONS IN ACTION**

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to find the types and levels of community services offered by congregations in Marion, IN. The results will demonstrate what is and could be done by these congregations in the community. This research consists of a questionnaire given to local clergy and returned through the mail. There was a twenty-eight percent response rate of the eighty churches surveyed and a variety of churches were represented. The questionnaire looked at the perceptions of the churches in regards to community involvement. The results demonstrated that Marion churches participate and run a number of programs and non-profits and analyzed correlations related to community involvement. Recommendations look into the gaps of service found and how to seek greater community participation for churches in the community for the future.*

## Introduction:

Marion, Indiana is a Midwest urban city that has experienced a number of financial struggles in its recent history. The city has lost multiple industrial jobs and there are many individuals in the community who are struggling financially and in other aspects of life. This is also a city with eighty churches. In the Biblical, American, and social history of American churches there are many factors that push for community involvement of churches and assisting the community. Reflecting on these facts this study endeavors to measure the amount of community involvement of Marion churches and to gain a better understanding of what churches do for and think about their community. The twenty question instrument was distributed to all local churches and had a response rate of twenty-eight percent. The results showed a number of non-profits run and supported by local congregations as well as many internal programs offered to community members. The questionnaire also recorded demographic and perception information on the surveyed churches. Statistical analysis helped this research analyze significant correlations and the results and recommendations help ask the critical questions about what can be done to increase involvement of churches in the community.

## Literature Review

The American church and her actions in society are the result of multiple perspectives and a joined history. The American, Biblical, and social services practice perspective of community action effect the day to day decisions and understanding of these congregations. Each perspective has had a significant impact on the American Church's understanding of the community and community participation. This research endeavor includes a quantitative

questionnaire distributed to churches in a Midwest urban city. The purpose of this study is to examine how the churches in this the city interact within their community and how they view their role as a church.

Limited social work resources discuss approaching churches as agents of social services in the community or analyzing the effects of churches involvement in a community. As the current economic crisis continues, there will be an increased need for aid and a decrease in resources. The resulting gaps in service will need the knowledge and skills of a social worker as well as the resources of those in the Church. In addition, it will also be an asset to the church community to understand the professional understanding of helping and reap the benefits of fulfilling the purpose of the Church.

Studies that most closely relate to this research involve the volunteers and the effective maintenance and success of church based programs (Garland, Myers, & Wolfer, 2008; Hugen, Wolfer, & Renkema, 2006; Ebaugh, Chafetz, & Pipes 2006). Garland et al. (2008) conducted an empirical study on the most effective manner for congregations to invite, incorporate, and motivate religious volunteers in a social work guided setting. They noted the value of church members as volunteers in social services and explore how to make a church base program survive and thrive. Hugen et al. (2006) looked into the effects on the volunteer in the church setting and how service relates to faith development. A detailed study of churches known for community involvement was surveyed and then those who claimed to be involved in the community ministries were given a moral thorough interview.

Faith-based organizations receive more attention and interest recently than the actual churches action. For example, Ebaugh et al. (2006) explain and explore how faith-based

organizations can be defined and the effects or displays of faith that are present; they did an empirical study of a variety of faith-based organizations not congregationally based and found the determining factors that categorize the organizations as having service religiosity, staff religiosity, or formal organizational religiosity. The conclusions show that faith is not something easily categorized or studied.

Cnaan et al.(1999) in the book “The Newer Deal” and the article “Charitable Choice and Faith-Based Welfare: A Call for Social Work “(Cnaan, & Boddie, 2002) addresses the relationship between social services and religious groups and partnership to reach the needs of many. With government support there is a possibility of increased faith-based and Charitable Choice organizations providing services under a religious stream. There are many different implications and challenges that may occur while providing a review and detail of the laws and their effect on faith-based providing for social needs.

Cnaan, Boddie, McGrew, & Kang, (2006) conducted research in Philadelphia that shows many parallels to the concept of community involvement from congregations. In the book the authors tribute the great work done by these churches throughout time and recognize how valuable that work is and has been to Philadelphia.

Coming for these perspectives, this project is focused on defining what is being done by churches in the community and to gain an understanding and plan of action for continued and increased church involvement in the communities well being.

## Methodology

Subjects:

The human subjects involved were congregational leaders of the 80 churches in Marion, IN. These participants, all adult church workers, are not a vulnerable population or under any “undue influence” for participation. There are no anticipated benefits or risks associated with the human subjects. The researcher’s contact information will be readily available for any potential questions or concerns. The option to discontinue is clearly available and stated on the informed consent document (Appendix A). The researcher used confidential coding for all potentially identifying information to reduce any risks or social complications. The confidentiality precautions should make it possible to prevent harm to the subjects. The Indiana Wesleyan University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved this research and the methodology used for the protection of human rights.

#### Procedure:

Each subject was mailed a questionnaire (Appendix B) to complete and return in a self-addressed stamped envelope. The questionnaires were sent out in mid-September 2009 were no longer received after October 10, 2009. SPSS analysis system was used to find relevant correlations from questionnaire results and to define demographic information on the churches’ responses.

Each church received a cover letter, an informed consent document, the questionnaire, and a self-addressed stamped envelope. Returned questionnaires were kept in a secure locked file and the data was given a sequential numbering to ensure consistency in recording. Informed consent documents were also kept. No names or codes were kept in a manner to associate any of the questionnaires to a specific individual or church. Upon the completion of the study all identifying documents will be securely shredded.

## Instrument:

The instrument (Appendix B) is a 20 item questionnaire that covers a variety of topics including the demographics, services, non-profit associations, community participation, and perceptions of the congregations. The instrument contains multiple-choice questions as well as opened-ended questions that were recorded and analyzed through content analysis. Item construction was done carefully and consistently to decrease respondent confusion.

## Results:

### Demographics:

Out of the eighty questionnaires sent, four were deemed undeliverable and twenty-one came back with responses. The response rate was twenty-eight percent response from the baseline of seventy-six questionnaires. This represents a result that cannot be generalized but does reflect the community in some ways and the results were found useful to this researcher.

The churches that responded represented some of the variety found in Marion. Of the churches surveyed, most twenty-eight percent came from south Marion with a mode of six and each of the nine sections of Marion were represented. Three churches that responded had a population of at least fifty percent African American attendees and the remaining eighteen churches were primarily Caucasian churches with limited representation of Hispanic or African American congregational attendees. Thirty-five percent of the churches represented were founded locally before 1900. The remaining churches were normally distributed between 1900 and 2006 with the peak years falling between 1950 and 1959. The curve for number of attendees was positively skewed. Thirty-eight percent of the churches surveyed had a weekly attendance ranging from forty to fifty-nine people on Sunday morning.

## Perceptions:

One section of the questionnaire specifically addressed the concept of who is it most important that the church serve and provide services. This question forced the respondents to consider which people group they felt the church needs to focus its helping force towards. Eight respondents refused to answer this section or wrote that all the people groups listed were equally served by the church. The people group that was least important to the most churches was titled “someone who does not to work”, chosen by forty-eight percent of respondents, and rated lower than the options of “someone addicted to drugs and can’t keep a job”, “someone recently unemployed”, and “a single mom who can’t find childcare for work”.

The second least important according to the survey results was college student. Marion, Indiana is a college town where much industry has moved out and the Christian University has spread farther into the city. These students when at school can flood the local churches but they leave over breaks and may not be closely involved with the churches they attend. This researcher found it very interesting that thirty-eight percent of the churches claimed these students as least important to serve when much of the business of Marion is centered around these students. The people groups chosen as most important groups to serve included: “a single mom who can’t find childcare for work” (33%), “those of a different racial group than the church majority” (28.6%), and “families with infants and small children (33%).

Another aspect of perceptions, how important it is to serve members and community members, was also reviewed. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents very strongly agreed that it is important for the church to meet the needs of its members and the remaining thirty-four percent responded strongly to the same statement. However, only fifty-two percent felt very



strongly that it is important for a church to meet the needs of its community and forty-three percent felt strongly. Five percent disagreed with the statement. When asked whether or not it is important for a church to be involved in the community all but one responded positively. The reasons included a biblical mission, the salvation of others, networking opportunity, and a heavenly reward.

Churches that had a mission statement were asked to include these in the questionnaire. Through content analysis of these mission statements it was found that fifty-seven percent mention service or others in the statement and sixteen percent mentioned the word love in their mission statement.

The What:

Another aspect of the questionnaire was to quantify what are churches in Marion doing for their community. The questionnaire asked for a list of non-profits served and in what levels are the churches involved in those non-profits. The survey also asked what types of programs are available from the church or supported by the church to assist those in need. Staffing needs were mentioned as the most significant hindrance to community involvement.

The number of non-profits supported ranges from zero to ten non-profits with a list of forty-four total assisted by the churches. This number was represented by an almost completely normal curve. The list ranges through a number of services and populations being served. There are also both religious and non-religious groups.

Programs coming from the church also represent a method of community involvement and support. The number of in-house programs listed ranged from 0-13. Of all the programs the one most often offered were a food pantry (66.7%), utilities assistance (61.9%), and divorce and

marriage counseling (52.4%). The programs moderately provided included clothing provision (33%), temporary housing (38.1%), medical bill assistance (33%), mental health services (23.8%), financial education (47.6%), parenting education (28.6%), childcare (33.3%), and small groups (23.8%). The least represented groups involve some of the most vulnerable members of society such as those needing jobs (14.3%), smoking cessation (14.3%), alcohol dependency (14.3%), domestic violence (19%), and chemical abuse (9.5%). Sixty-six percent of the programs provided financial services, seventy-one percent offer some sort of counseling services, and seventy-one percent offered a type of physical aid.

There is a correlation that if a church mentioned a biblical mission in their mission statement there was a strong correlation that more of their teen attendees were un-churched  $r(15)=-.632, p<.01$  and a  $r(15)=.523, p<.05$  moderate positive correlation between the mentioning of networking in why community involvement is important and the number of un-churched teens represented. Additionally, when more individuals are responsible for community outreach there is a strong positive correlation with the number of non-profits supported with time,  $r(17)=.714, p=.01$  and a moderate positive correlation with the number of non-profits supported overall,  $r(17)=.60, p<.01$ . Churches that were identified as mostly African American had a positive moderate correlation with answer that community involvement is important for networking purposes,  $r(17)=.625, p<.01$ .

## Discussion

The above statistics show that churches in Marion are involved in their communities. Without proper sampling a more comprehensive number of responses it is impossible to completely quantify the churches efforts but it is possible to recognize them. The short amount

of time used for this study may have decreased the number of respondents. With additional research money multiple copies of the survey could have been sent out or personal interviews could have increased the response rate. There was also a smaller number of African American churches that responded than a proportional half. This researcher wonders if personal interviews would have increased this population's responses.

## References:

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Appendix A-Informed Consent

Appendix B- Survey