

**Muncie Churches and Civic Engagement Project Overview**  
Center for Middletown Studies  
January, 2018

The Center for Middletown Studies completed the Muncie Churches and Civic Engagement Project during 2016 and 2017. It involved a series of oral history interviews with leaders of local faith communities with the aim of documenting and exploring the role of churches in the civic life of Muncie and the surrounding area. The impetus for the project stemmed from the observation that churches appeared to be among the few voluntary institutions that still attracted substantial, active memberships in the midst of local economic decline. The project was funded by the George and Frances Ball Foundation.

The larger question of economic change and its impact on Muncie and other, similarly situated rust-belt communities has been an ongoing part of the research agenda for the Center for Middletown Studies. Related projects have included oral histories focused on unions, economic development, and the process of consolidating the city's two high schools in 2015, a documentary film about the closing of the Warner Gear plant in 2009, a study of adolescent well-being in the context of economic decline, and a digital project on local labor history. The Center has also hosted several conferences built around issues related to the growth and decline of smaller cities, particularly in the American rust belt, and published several books and journal issues in this area. It will co-host another conference on "Vulnerable Cities" in May of 2018. Our sense that a study of churches and civic life was needed grew out of conclusions drawn from these activities.

For the Muncie Churches and Civic Engagement Project, the Center's researchers interviewed 26 pastor and lay leaders from a selection of faith communities located in and near Muncie. A list of the churches represented are appended to this document. While no sample of

churches can perfectly represent the full range of religious communities in the city, we believe we have engaged with a significant cross-section of denominations and faiths in the area. If the opportunity presents itself, the Center will consider completing additional interviews that add a meaningfully new dimension the study.

Current literature on the evolution of civic life in the United States points to a significant role for religious activity. Scholars examining the evolution of American civic life point to religious institutions as one source of continued voluntarism in an era when other forms of associational life have declined. They also cite a connection between religious participation and greater civic engagement. Churchgoers, they conclude, make some of the best citizens.

With this research in mind, we crafted interview questions that focused on several issues. Participants discussed the history and present condition of the church or religious group they lead, the key challenges it faces, the impact of broad economic and social changes on individual faith communities, changes in the character of the congregation's civic and service activities, and the interviewee's sense of the relationship between religious involvement and civic outlook of church members. Interviewers and their respondents also explored the connection between church life and formal political activity, when relevant.

Muncie's present condition makes these questions especially urgent. It now has fewer substantial corporate offices and industrial unions have largely disappeared. These institutions once supplied leaders to various civic activities but no longer do so at a comparable level. They also encouraged civic engagement among their workers or members. While employees of Ball State University and the IU-Ball Memorial Hospital medical complex fill that void in some respects, neither group does as much as their corporate predecessors, and neither offer blue-collar workers the same sense of civic inclusion that unions once facilitated. Churches and other

religious bodies have remained prominent in local affairs and have the potential, at least, to foster public and collective action by a broad cross-section of the community in ways that few other institutions do. For this reason, an examination of the relationship between churches and civic life locally seems especially relevant.

Upon completion of the interviews, the project team had the opportunity to reflect on what they had learned and to engage with members of the community through public presentations. Several themes emerged as salient and warrant further and more systematic analysis. The first of these is the sheer volume of civic and service activities associated with local faith communities. Serving hot meals, providing clothing, sponsoring schools and hosting public events are among the many and varied activities in which local churches are engaged. It would be worthwhile to complete a census of this work, if only to document the degree to which religious (and religiously-inspired nonprofits) groups contribute to local affairs. It seems clear that it represents a substantial portion of the city's response to the economic dislocation that has taken place over the past two decades. The indications derived from these interviews also point to another avenue of additional work: documenting the contributions of private and nonprofit social agencies, including both those affiliated with religious groups and those of a secular character. Together with the civic and service activities of faith communities, these efforts constitute an important and insufficiently studied aspect of the ground-level response to a declining industrial base, in Muncie and in other similarly situated cities.

The comments of the religious leaders interviewed for the project also suggest an evolution of the relationships among local faith communities. Once rivals as they strived to fill their own pews, many of them now view themselves as collaborators engaged in efforts to build a sense of community and to ameliorate the suffering triggered by increased poverty and the

social problems associated with it. As one interviewee declared, “sure we have differences, so we worship separately, but we’re still after kingdom work, sharing the gospel, and helping those in need, and I think that is really increased certainly in the last five years.” Several project participants suggested that this new openness to cooperation is a repercussion of the general decline in the place of religious institutions in American life. If religious groups—especially Christian churches—once imagined themselves as central elements of the prevailing culture, they now think of themselves as counter-cultural, doing battle against increased secularism and a rejection of institutionalized religion. Finding themselves engaged in a similar struggle, many leaders of faith communities see benefits to cooperation that were once less evident.

This newfound willingness to collaborate does not mean that local social divisions have become irrelevant. Perhaps the most significant of these tensions is the long-established split between the north and south sides of the city, a geographic pattern that has long helped distinguish the middle class from the working class. Numerous interviews took note of this rift. Several newer churches have explicitly trained their focus on addressing the challenges facing the south side of the city, where the majority of the local working-class lives, a recognition of the especially difficult circumstances that residents of that part of town face.

The salience of other social and cultural divisions is also evident in these interviews. Historically black churches have a long tradition of civic activism made necessary by an equally long tradition of racial discrimination. And while the old saw that American communities are never more segregated than on Sunday morning still applies generally in Muncie, a handful of newer churches have consciously sought to build multiracial congregations. Leaders of the local Jewish and Muslim communities made clear their sense of group distinctiveness, and even cited their shared experience as outsiders as the source of common ground between them. The two

groups have established an ongoing dialogue designed to address the challenges that non-Christians face in a mainly Christian community. The distinction between mainline Christian denominations and newer Christian groups organized around a broad Christian faith but generally not closely tied to centralized, national denominational groups was also evident. The traditional groups seem to face greater difficulty in sustaining their membership while the newer communities report larger memberships and greater growth. There were even a few hints of the emergence of a Spanish-speaking community, a trend less developed in Muncie than in many other postindustrial cities.

There is evidence of other interesting patterns with regard to the role churches now play in the community's civic life, which make the interviews assembled for the project a useful resource. Indications of significant overlap between the work of religious institutions and local non-profits devoted to addressing various social problems point to further research. In the next stages of its effort to document the local experience of deindustrialization, the Center will examine the wider nonprofit sector in Muncie. That effort will complement the Muncie Churches and Civic Engagement project and establish a basis for a more comprehensive analysis of the intersection of religious life and civic affairs.

**Appendix:  
List of Interviews**

<u>Church</u>	<u>Pastor/Leader</u>	<u>Interviewer</u>
Union Chapel	Gregg Parris	N. Lunsford
Commonway	Matt Carder	N. Lunsford
Gathering	Josh Brandt	W. Vander Hill
Islamic Center	Bibi Bahrami	N. Lunsford
Hazelwood Christian	Jason Jones	W. Vander Hill
Temple Beth-El	Anna Eliades	W. Vander Hill
Avondale Methodist	Josh Arthur	N. Lunsford
Glad Tidings	Kevin Holt	W. Vander Hill
Latter Day Saints	Eric Fenstermaker	W. Vander Hill
Destiny Christian Church	Keith O'Neal	W. Vander Hill
Urban Light	Andrew Draper	W. Vander Hill
Grace Episcopal	Tom Blake	J. Connolly
Union Missionary Baptist	Robert Scaife	J. Connolly
St Lawrence	David Hellman	J. Connolly
First Baptist	Wade Allen	W. Vander Hill
High Street	Charlotte Overmyer	N. Lunsford
Unitarian Universalist	Julia Corbett-Heymeyer	W. Vander Hill
Westminster Pres.	Kris Holroyd	W. Vander Hill
Holy Trinity Lutheran	Jerry O'Neal	W. Vander Hill
Garden of Gethsemane	Vickie Perkins	W. Vander Hill
Blood and Fire	Bob Ball	N. Lunsford
Grace Baptist	Rory Bond	W. Vander Hill
First Presbyterian	Pat Smith	W. Vander Hill
Salvation Army	Lt. Jonathan Taube	W. Vander Hill
Antioch Baptist	Edward Long	N. Lunsford
The Revolution	Neil Kring	J. Connolly