

CHURCHES UNITE, BUT CAUSES HAVE CHANGED

Violence and poverty replace social ills as areas of local concern

By Robert King

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The Church Federation of Greater Indianapolis, founded in 1912, made its name during the 20th century by bringing together the city's churches to fight great social ills racial discrimination, prejudice against Catholics and Jews, inequalities facing women.

Today, Church Federation Director Angelique Walker-Smith, who will be leaving her post later this month, says cooperation among churches looks much different. It is focused on efforts to bring peace to violent streets, fill food pantries and build houses for the poor.

What we see now, Walker-Smith said, is much more of a grass-roots ecumenicalism.

That change in how Indianapolis churches collaborate, scholars say, is reflective of a society where the traditional institutions of faith big denominations, powerful church councils have given way to a more diverse and decentralized landscape that lends itself to working on local matters better than it does broader societal issues.



Angelique Walker-Smith (second from left, seen with family) is moving to Washington, D.C., to work with nonprofit organization Bread for the World.

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Church cooperatives were, a century ago, mostly white and mostly old-line Protestant Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians and others. That lent itself to shared concern for issues

such as civil rights. Today's landscape is much more diverse liberal and conservative, black, white and Hispanic, even immigrant churches. That diversity of viewpoints means finding agreement on the societal issues of today is difficult. The Church Federation, said Arthur Farnsley II, a research professor of religious studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, wasn't going to be out in front of gay marriage and abortion.

One aspect of the early ecumenical movement was to help churches resolve doctrinal differences. Some of that continues, particularly between groups such as Lutherans and Episcopalians. But that's not a big thrust today. Instead, the focus is on efforts to fight hunger, aid the urban poor, restore prisoners to a place in society and build bridges between black and Latino communities.

Most of the energy has gone to how we work together for the good of the community, said Carol Johnston, an associate professor of religion and culture at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis.

The landscape has changed, too, with the growth of mega churches that are often large enough that they can carry out social service projects without looking to other congregations for help. They each have their own center of gravity that they work in and their own orbit, Johnston said.

Walker-Smith, who will be moving to Washington, D.C., to reach out to black and African churches for the nonprofit organization Bread for the World, said today's ecumenism is also seen in churches that allow other churches to share their sanctuaries, that come together to address issues in their corners of the city.

You have very localized expressions of Christian unity now, she said.

Such micro changes are no less important than tackling the massive social issues, she said. Somebody has got to do the hard work of building relationships, Walker-Smith said.

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Rev. Angelique Walker-Smith visited with Olgen Williams during her thanksgiving celebration and dinner Friday at the Light of the World Christian Church.



Rev. Felipe Martinez leads a prayer for Angelique Walker-Smith, her husband Drew Smith and daughter Asha Smith.

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