In our research and reflections at Lake Institute, we often seek to highlight the most current data and important trends around giving to religion. Of course, history and tradition are often equally important in shaping the motivations and institutional frameworks around religious giving.

In celebration of Indiana’s bicentennial, the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy is hosting the Hoosier Philanthropy Conference, February 18-19, 2016, at the Indiana Historical Society. “The conference aims to examine the role that philanthropy has played in the development of Indiana’s public life in order to deepen our understanding of how philanthropic action has and can continue to advance the public good.” For those of you near Indianapolis, we welcome you to register to attend this conference which is free and open to the public.

In preparation for the conference, I have spent time investigating the centrality of religion’s role in philanthropy throughout Indiana. Religion has remained pervasive in shaping communities and serving the public both then and now. And while there may be certain Hoosier distinctives, most of the themes are applicable across the American landscape.

Across American history, religious giving has often served as the foundation for building institutions, local communities, and our larger society. Often before there was local, state, or federal government, religious actors took it upon themselves to care for those both inside and outside of their communities. Religious agents were often pioneers: the first to provide education, charity, and social services in new communities. As a larger civil society developed, that initial relationship evolved, but religious giving and volunteering still often serve at the center of these issues. Let me highlight several points of connection:

1. **The interplay between major and mass philanthropy** - Studying giving often leads us to focus on major philanthropists – certainly Indiana has those stories. However, while we cannot overlook the large-scale impact of institutions such as the Lilly Endowment, Inc., most often it is the mass philanthropy of individual citizens and their gifts to local faith communities that has defined religious giving. While harder to track, these individual gifts week after week and year after year demonstrate the ongoing impact of religious giving. It is in the interplay between major and mass philanthropy that defines these philanthropic traditions.

2. **The give and take of religious philanthropy** - Another theme is the role of religious institutions as both a major recipient as well as an agent of philanthropy. Congregations may be the largest recipient of mass philanthropy, but a significant portion of these funds
are passed on to social services, education, and various philanthropic causes. The story of religious philanthropy could also be told as the tension between the give and take of philanthropy. Which direction is more prominent, or is the story more cyclical than linear?

3. Defining religion and philanthropy - Religious actors and institutions become even more significant when broadening the definition of philanthropy beyond money to also include service, volunteering, advocacy, sharing communal resources, and cultivating a civil society. Religious institutions provide the preponderance of volunteer hours, develop community leaders, and often serve as central gathering spaces for polling places, neighborhood associations, Boy Scouts, or Alcoholic Anonymous meetings. Giving happens in all sorts of ways.

4. Distinguishing the purposes of charity, philanthropy, and religious giving - Traditional religious giving was often at the center of definitional debates over charity versus philanthropy. If religious giving was often seen as charity, philanthropy was often contrasted as professionalized, secular, and focused on long-term needs. Of course, religious actors were never outside these debates. In fact, they often found themselves at the center. Religious giving has often been defined by questions about who should help whom, the priorities for providing needed assistance, and the boundaries around one’s giving. Questions of the role of philanthropy often followed. Was philanthropy simply to provide for basic needs or to promote institutional change? Should religious giving seek to develop an individual’s character, propose to help shape the morality of society, or were such purposes off limits in respecting individual agency and a pluralist society? Those questions continue today.

5. Cooperation or Competition - Philanthropy sometimes provided opportunities for cooperation among religious communities across theological, economic, or political lines. Yet, at other times philanthropy fostered competition as various traditions duplicated services, fought with one another over control or market share, and even used philanthropy to compare themselves to one another in recognition and prestige.

These themes stand out among many more to demonstrate the significance of history and tradition on the ongoing shape and direction of religious philanthropy. It is evident across history and across a broad religious spectrum that some questions surrounding religious giving may have changed. Many others have remained the same. It is equally clear that religious philanthropy has always remained a vital part of the American civil society.