



Outside the Walls

I attend an old church in a charming neighborhood of Portland, Oregon. When I say old, I mean old by west-coast American standards. The current building is 118 years old, but the parish was founded back in 1851 when Portland was little more than a rowdy frontier town. Today, no less than 11 major streets or neighborhoods in Portland still bear the names of influential pioneer members of this church who worked to bring faith in Jesus to this unholy outpost.

These same leaders would be initially delighted if they could see their legacy today—a great stone edifice nestled among tree-lined streets, other houses of worship, elegant apartment buildings, well-kept Victorian homes, parks, boutique shops, restaurants and upscale pubs. But they'd be horrified at the crime, homelessness and substance abuse that plagues the area—not unlike parts of any big city.

I suppose I could just stay home in my living room (35 miles away, in the country) or opt for a “safe” suburban megachurch closer to home. But this particular church's art, music, style of worship and people connect with me. More importantly, services are stunningly beautiful, inspiring and thoroughly Christ-centered.

Yet congregants and clergy are acutely aware of the abject misery just outside their walls, and they're doing something about it. The church runs a large food pantry every day except Sunday, and offers a weekly sit-down meal where the unhoused are invited to dine with other parishioners. Just in the last year, demand at the food pantry increased by 200%.

Every few weeks I serve as a host at services. Among other duties, we cheerfully welcome everyone who enters—members, visitors and unhoused alike. The massive front doors always remain open during services—even in freezing weather. As we stand in the doorways, we can't help but hear the dichotomy—the chaos without and the peace and order within. We must, however, be vigilant, as some visitors may arrive drug impaired, suffering from

severe mental illness or even carrying weapons. To be on the safe side, the church offers us professional crisis intervention training. We always have opioid overdose antidote on hand for emergencies. It's just part of the “abnormal” world we live in, amplified in the city. By contrast, my church of origin met just five blocks away in the same neighborhood in the early 1960s. At that time it was an anxiously exclusive—if not paranoid—denomination. Doors were kept tightly shut during services and stalwart deacons ensured no unwelcome people slipped in. And even in those days there were poor, unhoused people roaming the streets.

Exclusivism—no religious institution is immune. At times in its long history, my current church drifted into exclusivism and had to correct its error—often with dissension. And exclusivism has a way of reinventing itself—often masquerading as respectability, virtue or holiness. This is nothing new. As early as the 3rd and 4th centuries, rigorous Christian sects such as the Novatianists and Donatists insisted that attendance should be restricted to the “faultless.” But who does not grapple with some form of emotional or mental impairment?

Author Aldous Huxley once wrote *“The real hopeless victims of mental illness are to be found among those who appear to be most normal...Many of them are normal because they are so well adjusted to our mode of existence....Their perfect adjustment to that abnormal society is a measure of their mental sickness. These millions of abnormally normal people, living without fuss in a society to which, if they were fully human beings, they ought not to be adjusted.”* —Brave New World Revisited

In other words, those of us who breeze through life exclusively insulated from the suffering and craziness around us may be the ones who are truly mentally and emotionally impaired. But unlike Huxley, I don't believe it's hopeless. The Holy Spirit is prompting everyone toward empathy and compassion, because, although we may not all know it yet, every last one of us is loved by God. □

—Monte Wolverton