

Whited sepulchers or living stones?

Many churches have signs declaring that all are welcome. But are their buildings really inviting to the community around them?

By [Jonathan Grieser](#)

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I don't know how many times I've heard it. Whenever I open the doors of Grace Episcopal Church in Madison, where I serve, during the week or on Saturdays and people wander in, someone will say, "I've walked past this church for years and have never been inside."

Such statements don't surprise me anymore. Most Madison residents who walk the sidewalks of Capitol Square are on their way somewhere: to work, to a restaurant or concert, to the farmer's market or a demonstration, or back home. When we walk like that, with a destination in mind, we rarely take time to notice our surroundings. Our attention is diverted from our journey's goal or our phone screen only if something in our peripheral vision distracts us, something new or different, a door that's opened, beckoning us into unfamiliar space, when every other time we've passed by it has been closed.

Even so, if the door is open and we notice it, will we take the opportunity to walk in, to encounter the space hidden behind those heavy wooden doors? Likely not, after all, we're not just out for a stroll. We're on our somewhere, to work or home, to the farmer's market, or returning from the market carrying heavy bags full of vegetables. We don't have time or the inclination. We might even think that the invitation of an open door is not meant for us.

I was walking down 14th Street in Washington, D.C., during my sabbatical this fall, awash in the various sights and sounds of an unfamiliar city. As I walked, I passed by several Protestant churches in various states of repair—United Church of Christ,

Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist. They were all imposing edifices, reminders of a time when mainline Christianity was at the center of American culture. All of them showed in their fabric the transformation of America and of Christianity in the decades since they were built. There was evidence of the crisis of homelessness in urban America, both in the services that these churches were providing and in measures the churches took to restrict homeless people from sections of the property where they were unwelcome.

Most if not all of the churches announced somewhere in some similar language: “God welcomes all” or “All are welcome.” One of those signs hung on the side of a church behind a high iron fence with padlocked gates. On weekdays, except for the homeless congregating around them, all of these churches looked forbidding and foreboding. Just as commuters and tourists passed by quickly without a glance, these churches were further evidence that American culture had passed them by without a backward glance.

The same was true in other cities I visited—Richmond, New York City, Boston. Boston (or Cambridge) fascinated me in that respect. It’s a city I once knew well, having lived there from 1982 to 1991. I walking the streets of Cambridge, Somerville, and Boston countless times and for hours on end. I remembered many of the churches I walked past this week, in Harvard Square, down Mass Ave to Porter Square. I remembered walking past them but had never entered any of them. The number of churches I actually had visited in my decade or more in Boston was relatively small, the number I had worshiped in was even smaller.

What I did remember was the response I had in the ’80s while walking past many of these churches. It was the same response I had in 2016 while walking past churches on 14th Street in Washington. I assumed the condition of the exterior was evidence of the vitality and vibrancy of the congregation that worshiped there. Certainly, disrepair is clear evidence of the financial resources available. I know all too well how expensive maintenance and upkeep of large, historic buildings can be, how demanding of congregational time, energy, and money.

Often, we look at such buildings with sadness and regret, mourning the passing of an era when the buildings were full of life and built to provide space and programming for large and growing congregations.

That's not always the case. When I was studying for my M.Div at Harvard Divinity School in the mid 1980s, I did my field education at a mainline Protestant church in Boston's Back Bay. The building was on the National Historical Register. Its architect was H. H. Richardson (no, it wasn't [Trinity Church, Copley Square](#)); the friezes on its tower created by Bartholdi, the sculptor of the Statue of Liberty. It was proud of its Tiffany windows, its long history, its architectural pedigree. When I was there, Sunday attendance averaged in the forties and it was easy to imagine Sundays decades before when the sanctuary seating around 800 was packed full.

In fact, its history was very different: the building was built by an already-established Unitarian congregation that wanted to relocate in the newly developed and very fashionable Back Bay after the Civil War. But the design and construction were far beyond the congregation's financial resources and it went bankrupt during construction. Completed in 1872, the architectural landmark stood empty and unused for a decade, until a Protestant congregation purchased it and moved in. In subsequent decades, other congregations from that denomination merged into this congregation as demographic patterns shifted. Certainly, it had thrived over the decades but it had never fully occupied the space it had purchased in 1882.

Likely similar stories could be told of mainline congregations across the country with large, beautiful buildings constructed in a time of optimism and growth, built to attract people moving into nearby neighborhoods. Boston's Back Bay is a prime example of this. Within a few blocks are two Episcopal churches in addition to Unitarian, UCC, Presbyterian, and American Baptist. In a few blocks, the status, wealth, and marketing efforts of 19th century mainline Christianity is on full display.

Whether such buildings and the congregations that inhabit them will survive is an open question. But it's also important to recognize that buildings in relative states of disrepair do not necessarily tell the whole story or reflect the vitality of the congregation that worships there. I was reminded of this when I visited St. James Episcopal Church in Porter Square, Cambridge. It was one of those churches I was thinking about earlier when I wrote about passing them by. I lived near Porter Square for most of the time I was in Boston. For about a year, my commute took me more or less directly past St. James. I never entered it or worshiped there. That same year, one of my roommates did attend regularly. He loved the worship and the warm community. St. James has considerable architectural interest. From the outside it seems to be in considerable disrepair. Certainly, its parish house is rundown, and it is surrounded by an overgrown and unwelcoming garden.

In contrast to the uninviting aspects of its buildings and garden, St. James also shows signs of vitality to the community. A permanent Black Lives Matter sign stands as witness on the Massachusetts Ave side of the property and near the main entrance to the church. Around the side and back of the property construction is underway. After talks that began in 2007, construction has begun on a condominium development in which St. James is a partner. In addition to market-rate and some affordable units, St. James will have a new parish hall and a significant start on an endowment for ongoing building maintenance. A newly configured garden will welcome passersby into space that is inviting and offers respite from the busy streets of the neighborhood.

I have no doubt that when I walk past St. James five years from now, I will see a building and property that are welcoming and inviting to passersby, that the vitality of the congregation will be on full display seven days a week, and that its property will be a spiritual haven in the midst of a busy city.

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