

The poor door: Class separation in the church

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [October 1, 2014](#) issue



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The sky-high cost of housing here in Manhattan just hit a new low. Extell, one of the city's largest developers, has been accepted for the Inclusionary Housing Program. This means that the company is allowed to construct larger buildings with generous subsidies and tax breaks as long as its plans include a certain percentage of low-income apartments. Apparently the only way to get developers to do what they should do is by appealing to their bottomless self-interest. As if to underscore that there is no good will involved, Extell's application has a provision that the people residing in the more affordable apartments would have their own entryway—in a back alley behind the building.

According to a company spokesman, "No one ever said that the goal was full integration of these populations." Well, someone might have said that—like Isaiah or Jesus—but what did they know about 21st-century New York City real estate? "I think it's unfair to expect very high-income homeowners who paid a fortune to live in their building to have to be in the same boat as low-income renters, who are very

fortunate to live in a new building in a great neighborhood.” But how great is a neighborhood when some residents wish that others were invisible?

Predictably, news of the poor door has ignited flames of outrage. But they’ll die down. The poor doors in luxury buildings are just the latest manifestation of what goes on every day. Our systems of health care, education, immigration, and criminal justice all have their poor doors in the back alleys of edifices built for the more privileged.

As part of a mainline church I join the disgust over apartment buildings with separate entrances, and yet the truth is that most of our congregations have front-door people and side-door people, and the latter are usually poorer. In many congregations the members enter through the main door and the food pantry patrons enter through a side door. We don’t do really well with multicultural ministries, but transformative multiclass communities are even rarer.

Of course, not every door needs to lead to the altar. We serve our neighbors with no explicit or implied evangelistic pressure. On the other hand, a person living in poverty who comes into our churches may look around on a Sunday morning and feel out of place. What would need to happen to change that? In the new Extell apartments the wealthy have the river views and perks such as gym and pool use in their building. Those who use the poor door will be denied entrance into those facilities. We value our sacraments as much more than perks, yet even if we wish it weren’t so, there’s often a class-based separation between those who enjoy these treasures in our sanctuaries and those who do not.

Most churches I know are really good at serving others, and that ministry is indispensable for followers of Jesus. In recent years community organizing has become recognized as an important extension of ministry that allows us to move from social service to social change. As Martin Luther King Jr. put it: “On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion . . . comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.” Many churches still shy away from this work of structural change. At best, it has side-door status: money flows into Good Samaritan ministries that stop short of larger transformations.

Having served in urban ministry for over 30 years, I see our attention shifting away from planting churches in areas of poverty. In a time of economic struggle many urban churches have had to close their doors—both front and side. It's possible to conclude that our past efforts were ineffective and created dependency. But every pastor I know who has worked in such ministries talks about lives changed for the better and leaders who were nurtured because the church was there with open doors. I fear we are giving up on such places.

Some of the most creative church starts today are what we call *emergent* communities. The ones that get the most attention are doing wonderful and essential work, especially in reaching people who have felt alienated from the church. Yet many of these people are the disaffected children of the demographic we've always served. We need more of these communities, but we also need to take some of that out-of-the-box vision and focus it on addressing the prevailing poor-door reality of our church.

Whenever I visit our congregation's vice president and her family of four, I sit on the chair facing the lower bunk of their bed; the space is so tight that our knees touch. The parents sleep on the bottom bunk and the daughters (in college and high school) share the top. They live in a building where families of Mexican immigrants are squeezed into single-room cubicles without kitchen or closet and use a bathroom in the corridor with dozens of other people. This building sits in the shadow of a gleaming high-rise where the penthouse sold for millions. When I say, "in the shadow," I mean on the same block, in eyesight of public housing projects and rent-stabilized middle-income apartments.

As a church in the middle of this diversity, we are trying to be open to the ways that God is gathering our fragmented lives together with a special focus on those our city pushes aside—the poor, the homeless, the undocumented, and the mentally ill. We feel called to use our space and the community God gathers here to build connections among those disconnected one from another. Our Latina support group cooks arroz con pollo for the homeless LGBTQ youth in our shelter. One morning a week after the shelter residents put their beds away and head off for school or internships or jobs, our basement becomes a safe space for immigrant workers to discuss labor violations with lawyers and organizers. Some of them attend our church. And some members of our church who patronize the surrounding restaurants now boycott the ones that treat their workers unjustly and prod the owners to embrace ethical labor practices. We eat at one table on Sunday, and that

compels us to seek the abundance of justice at all tables.

This ministry is made possible by our location, but it is by no means obvious. It requires ongoing intentionality, prayer, and patience. As I write, the children in our summer day camp are singing a song about Jonah in the whale: “Lord, I’m a little bit afraid; No, make that very much afraid.” The children of privilege are singing with the children who dwell in nearby shelters, housing projects, and immigrant cubicles. We are getting ready for the end to all that divides us, the day when all shall be well. Like Jonah we often resist our mission, we doubt and fear, we whine, we are miserly with the mercy we depend on. We get up to try again.

A church member living in supportive housing for those dealing with mental illness came by this week for a scheduled prayer session. Every Sunday she arrives for worship with an impossibly long list of friends to pray for, in extraordinary detail, and we made a deal that she would pick three per Sunday and our prayer group would take on the rest. Due to vacations, illness, and work schedules, this week’s prayer group was down to just Susan and me. She once lived on the street, and her prayers always include a number of homeless friends. Sometimes I get impatient with the length and minutiae of her prayers, as if I had something more important to do than join her in attending to the assembled souls she honors with her petitions. Then she looked up and said, “The homeless are seen as part of the landscape and scenery of New York, like pigeons. They are thought of as *its*.” Susan will never be guilty of that. We are richer because she brings her prayers and her wisdom through the front doors each Sunday.

It’s easy to jump on the outrage bandwagon over these latest poor doors in New York City, but it’s better to listen to prophets like Susan and channel our energies into the labor another prophet called “repairing the breach.” Wherever we live and minister, opportunities await.