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Northwest Christians explore faith, art and culture

It's about encouragement to produce and seek excellence in art — whether in "high" or "pop" culture — outside of church, in the wider culture, as an expression, and exploration, of faith. It's also about finding community after years of feeling like outcasts.

By Janet I. Tu



IN A BREWPUB between Fremont and Ballard, several dozen people nursing burgers and beers laugh boisterously over a discussion of "Glee."

More than a few Gleeks — fans of the TV show about a high-school glee club — are in the audience for this conversation group that often meets at Hale's Ales Brewery & Pub.

With his booming voice and hearty guffaw, longtime radio broadcaster Dick Staub hosts these regular gatherings called The Kindlings Muse, inviting panelists and recording the events for podcast.

On this night, he stimulates talk of "Glee" as a moneymaking model, of the show's explorations of teenage identity, and of the episode "Grilled Cheesus," in which one of the high-schoolers sees the image of Jesus on his grilled-cheese sandwich.

At one point, a panelist takes issue with Staub's characterization of "Glee" as not having much authentic teenage rawness or immediacy.

"But I'm the host," Staub says. "I must be right."

"But the 'host' must be broken and given away," cracks another panelist.

Oh, snap!

The audience "oooohs" and laughs.

"A new commandment I give you," Staub retorts. "That we love one another."

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Like the laughter, the language of faith flows freely at these gatherings.

Inspired by The Inklings, a group of friends including writers C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Dorothy Sayers who met at an Oxford pub for lively conversations, Staub, 63, launched The Kindlings Muse in 2006. The idea was to create stimulating intellectual and spiritual discussions for "thoughtful creatives for whom God is of central importance," Staub says.

At these gatherings, topics have ranged from the science of spirituality to the gospel according to Motown to the theology of Academy Award nominees.

"The questions being asked out here are much more interesting than the questions being asked in church," opines Staub, who wrote "The Culturally Savvy Christian" and other books. He is also senior pastor of the nondenominational Orcas Island Community Church.

The Kindlings Muse is just one of several groups or events that have formed here over the years, drawing together Christians to explore issues of faith, art and culture. Some groups go back decades; others are new. Some are informal, gathering at coffeehouses or people's homes mainly for support and friendship. Others are more formal, with regular events or retreats.

Those who take part represent different denominations, though many tend to come from evangelical traditions, even if they dislike that label. The groups typically involve artists from various disciplines, from written word to music to visual and performing arts. Many are producing artists; others draw artists together. Some do both.

It's not really about using art to enhance worship *within* a church. Nor is it about using art to win souls, or about producing "Christian art," if by that, one means the more easily sentimental works that have come to be associated with the term.

Rather, it's about encouraging themselves and others to produce and seek excellence in art — whether in "high" or "pop" culture — *outside* of church, in the wider culture, as an expression, and exploration, of their faith.

"Religion should never be a shortcut to anything," says Gregory Wolfe, editor of Image, a highly respected, Seattle-based literary quarterly that explores arts and religion. "Piety doesn't make you a better writer."

It's also about finding community after years of feeling like outcasts.

Certainly, it's not unusual for artists — religious or not — to feel misunderstood. But for artists who are Christian, other factors are at play. While some churches have long been supportive of the arts, among others — especially evangelical — there's been a strain of suspicion, even hostility, toward art. Especially modern art. On the flip side, artists who are Christian tend to be regarded warily in the broader art world.

In response, organizations such as The Kindlings have formed. Staub founded the nonprofit in 1999, which, in addition to Muse podcasts, also includes retreats called The Kindlings Hearth and an annual festival called KindlingsFest.

Wolfe's Image organization now includes online seminars and The Glen Workshop, a retreat and workshops held for 17 years, and this year expanding to the East Coast. Through them — as well as in discussion groups and artists salons, through Facebook and online forums — community has formed.

The get-togethers have affected their work, from a musician who wrote song lyrics sparked by a painting he saw at The Glen Workshop, to a painter who found inspiration in a writer's descriptive words.

But often the impact is less direct. It's the sense of understanding and community that many of the artists find the most valuable.

"There is clearly something very vibrant happening in Seattle," says Christy Tennant, director of global community for International Arts Movement, a New York-based organization that gathers artists to wrestle with these issues.

"There are a lot of like-minded artists who have been operating independently from one another, but now the dots are connecting."

FOR YEARS, Wolfe says, speaking in the small Queen Anne neighborhood house that serves as the offices of Image, he would often get letters or phone calls from creative people who were Christians saying, "I thought I was all alone in the world."

Wolfe, in fact, was one of them.

Raised in a conservative political and Protestant family that thought of modernity as monolithic and evil, "the thing that weirded me out," he said, was that he loved the works of writers such as T.S. Eliot.

And what was Eliot doing? Working with fragmentation, allusion. "I realized: This is modernism," said Wolfe, 51, who is now Catholic. "I had a meltdown."

The meltdown eventually led to his co-founding in 1989 (along with his wife, writer Suzanne Wolfe), of Image, which has, over the years, featured works by esteemed artists including Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Annie Dillard, filmmaker Wim Wenders and visual artist Gerhard Richter.

In those first years, the publication was an oddity: In the midst of the culture wars that often pitted faith and art against each other, here was a publication about faith *and* art that was neither simply moralistic and didactic nor purely out to shock (though its first cover, a stylized image of a pregnant Virgin Mary, was hugely controversial at the Roman Catholic college where the Wolfes were teaching).

These days, Wolfe gets fewer messages from people who say they feel alone.

But just minutes after saying that, he goes to meet with a modern dancer referred to him by Staub.

"I didn't meet someone who danced and had my faith" for years, the dancer, Karin Stevens, says to Wolfe.

It's not that Stevens, 36, who founded her own dance company and is dance curator at the nonprofit Fremont Abbey Arts Center, wants to be known as a "Christian choreographer." At least not any more than, say, someone would want to be pigeonholed as a female painter. And her company and choreography are not specifically religious.

It's just that finding people who understood both her creative and spiritual sides "felt like a deep sigh," she says. "They could bring together the pieces that were (until then) separate for me."

Stevens has dreams of establishing dance programs at schools, including, she suggests to Wolfe, at Seattle Pacific University, where Wolfe teaches and heads the master of fine arts program in creative writing.

It won't be easy, Wolfe says, and Stevens concurs. Both acknowledge that modern dance ranks toward the bottom in terms of how some Christians regard the arts. Unlike, say, a book or a painting where there's a product that lasts, dance is live and ephemeral. Not to mention sensual. And modern dance? Ephemeral, sensual *and* abstract.

Wolfe suggests she attend the Glen Workshop.

"I really want to go," she says.

And so another dot is connected.

THOUGH JONATHAN Assink has been amazed at the number of people who've told him they thought they were the only ones involved in both arts and church, that's not his story.

Last fall, spurred by Tennant of International Arts Movement, Assink, 28, helped found Seattle Art and Coffee, in which a group of artists — most of whom are, like himself and Stevens, in their late 20s to late 30s — meet every other Friday at the Green Bean Coffeehouse in Greenwood and keep in touch via Facebook.

"It's refreshing to have this group that shares the same vocabulary and worldview," says Assink, a writer, photographer and graduate student in international development at Northwest University, an Assemblies of God school in Kirkland.

The churches Assink has attended — he now goes to Sanctuary Christian Reformed Church in Seattle — have been supportive of his artistic endeavors, he says. That's in no small part because they are newer churches, typically attracting younger worshippers — people who grew up in a highly visual world and are used to working with digital tools and the Internet.

It also illustrates a softening of the gap in recent years between evangelical institutions and the arts.

The Catholic Church had, for centuries, sponsored some of the greatest artworks known to humankind. But come the Protestant Reformation, theologian John Calvin "was careful to keep arts out of the church lest Christians worship the art form rather than the art of creation," says Clay Schmit, academic director of the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology and the Arts at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif.

The culture wars of recent decades created a wider rift.

That's changing.

Fuller, for instance, started the Brehm Center 10 years ago "on the speculation that arts would be playing an increased role in churches," Schmit says. "That's turned out to be the case."

Seattle Pacific University, which in 1997 rescinded a job offer to poet Scott Cairns after an erotic poem Cairns wrote was brought to the attention of the university president — is increasing its emphasis on the arts. It's housed Image since 2000, has on its faculty notable writers and visual artists, and its creative-writing MFA program is believed to be the only one in the country that focuses on faith and writing. The university also plans to build an arts center that would include a performance hall, theaters, art galleries and a chapel.

Painter Laura Lasworth, professor of art at SPU, believes the school has come to realize that "in the arts — especially visual arts — evangelical Protestantism threw the baby out with the bathwater."

A large part of the change, as Schmit at Fuller acknowledges, is due to the "evangelical urge to evangelize."

The Brehm Center trains people who use arts in or for the sake of the church. But it also serves artists who are Christian but don't want their works used specifically to bring people to the faith. Indeed, the very idea of using art to evangelize turns off quite a few in Seattle.

"I'm not a salesman for Jesus," says Staub of The Kindlings Muse.

Musician Robert Deeble, an alum of both The Kindlings Hearth and the Glen Workshop, tells this story of how he met Wolfe:

He and Wolfe were both at a conference on art and religion when a young man approached, saying: "You guys should be bringing more people into the faith."

"I told him: 'Nothing cheapens faith more than utilizing art that way,'" Deeble recalls. "Greg looked at me then and we kind of knew we would be friends."

EVEN AS the evangelical stance on the arts has softened, some see a widening rift between the arts world and its acceptance of Christians.

Scott Nolte, a Kindlings Hearth alum and producing artistic director at Taproot Theatre in Greenwood, says that 35 years ago, when he founded Taproot, the fact that he was Christian was ignored. But the label "Christian" (not to mention the term "evangelical") has become so loaded with political and social baggage that if someone were entering the field today and "was out of the closet as a Christian, it might

be held against you. Because it would be assumed you would be pro-gun, anti-gay."

Makoto Fujimura, the New York-based painter who founded International Arts Movement, says major art critics have told him that if he didn't identify himself as a Christian, he'd be one of the top artists of the time.

"If you have any faith at all, that's treated as suspect, especially if you're Christian," he says. "The idea is you're working against the idea of freedom, self-expression."

In any case, there's still the question of whether the art they support, puts religious ideals ahead of artistic ones.

For those involved in arts-and-faith discussions, it's not necessarily an either-or question.

Staub, of *The Kindlings*, is fond of quoting the Dutch scholar Hans Rookmaaker who said: "Jesus didn't come to make us Christian. Jesus came to make us fully human."

Great art, he and others believe, can help do the same. How they approach that differs, in semantics if not more.

Fujimura's movement, in addition to encouraging artists to "engage the culture that is," also urges them "to create the world that ought to be."

Wolfe thinks that's misguided. "What we need," he wrote in an essay in *Image*, "is not the notion of a world that ought to be but the capacity to see the dimension of grace irradiating the world that is."

What he's interested in, Wolfe says, is exceptional work that is forged in the heat of an artist's personal struggle. And if that artist is a person of faith, wrestling with and exploring that faith is part of being true to who he or she is, and thus, makes the artwork true.

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Great art and beauty — something that's well-crafted in form as well as meaning — has the ability to save the world, Wolfe says, paraphrasing Dostoevsky.

That's hyperbole, Wolfe admits. But he points out that beauty can sneak under the radar of the conscious mind, beneath the clamor of conflicting ideologies and moral high-mindedness — and perhaps, along the way, heal rifts and bring together the wider community.

"In the end, neither proselytizing nor polemics will allow us to find common ground," he says. "Beauty and the imagination provide a space where we can find ourselves entering that common ground almost unawares."

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