

Highland

Continued from Page 1D

sidewalk to the entrance to the classroom. As we were standing there, a car zipped down the road. The chief scowled and flashed his badge at the driver who slowed down. He could clearly see the situation.

I asked him what could be done. I thought he was joking when he responded that the city couldn't put a sidewalk there "because it's too dangerous." I was incredulous. "It's dangerous for students to cross the street but they do it every day – and the city can't do something to make it safer?" He shook his head. "I don't see what we can do; there are liability issues; people shouldn't cross here."

Students continued to risk their lives every day, teachers would worry, and thankfully, somehow, no one was hit in the six years I taught at the school.

What's this have to do with faith issues? Probably quite a bit. Here's what I'm thinking.

We face dangerous situations all the time but don't always handle these in the same way. Some people choose to hide or avoid to minimize the risks. Others barrel forward with a "devil may care" attitude (some can be rather suicidal).

Those who assume the role of "guardians" or protectors of the faith (any faith) tell us what the dangers are and how to confront or avoid them. With an excess of caution they may instruct the flock, "Don't go there, or do that – you may fall (from faith) or hurt yourself (or God)." They are afraid and so pass their fears to those who look to them for protection. Like the chief flashing his badge, some depend on authority figures.

In my view the worst example of fearful faith is when we're told it is dangerous to think, question or doubt. "We can't let you cross here," they seem to say. "It's just not safe for your faith."

They may be right, of course. Someone who chooses to cross a line, pass through a doorway, or walk over a bridge may discover the other side is good, maybe better, and they're glad they took the risk to cross over. The vulnerability can be scary and



Crossing near the private school. CHRIS HIGHLAND/
SPECIAL TO ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

it takes more awareness as well as responsibility to make a choice to take the step. The alternative is to wait on others to hold your hand, show the way and tell you when and where it's safe.

Crosswalks are not always there, or visible. Do we know where it's safe to cross? Does it always have to be safe? Should we paint new crosswalks and tell others it's OK to use the one we painted? What if everyone painted their own?

Are we safe? Those who believe in an all-powerful deity might feel they are under the "wings," the protection, of God. But, to my knowledge, God is not a crossing guard.

At the intersections of faith and free thought something wonderful can happen, if we are willing to risk the safety of our views. We can get a street-level perspective, draw in other eyes and voices, and map out something that makes more sense. The risks don't disappear. But a wise consensus assures us we've considered the possibilities with everyone's well-being in mind.

Could this help us decide where crosswalks should go, and when we should stop, look and listen?

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.