

The Chaplaincy Report

LA County General Medical Center
Rev. Stephanie Kang MDiv BCC CT
December 30, 2025

Greetings,

The past two months have been very busy here at LA County General Medical Center (LACGMC) in East LA. My second chaplaincy report includes several unusual events related to Fr. Chris Ponnet's passing, major annual events, my observations of leadership practices during this liminal season, and personal reflections on my identity as a Presbyterian. All are presented in chronological order.

Remembering Fr. Chris Ponnet

Since Fr. Chris led the urban interfaith chaplaincy ministry at LACGMC for over thirty years, many staff members experienced shock and disbelief at his passing. A memorial service for hospital staff took place in a conference room of the main inpatient care building on October 28, 2025.

A week later, a large-scale public Funeral Mass was held at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels on November 4, 2025. As the only non-Catholic minister among the service leaders, I was invited to participate in the Universal Prayers during the Mass.

Word of God, who frees us from fear and division, continue the work of unity and compassion Fr. Chris began among us – uniting your Church and all faith communities in peace and justice. We pray.

It was Fr. Chris's specific request that his funeral include a minister from a non-Catholic community in the leadership of the service. The Funeral Mass was solemn, profoundly comforting, and deeply binding for people from diverse contexts. Here is the link to the livestream recording: Fr. Chris Ponnet Funeral Mass: [Full Video](#) and [Stephanie Kang's Part](#).

Shortened Chaplain Service Hours

For many years, the chaplain team provided 24/7 coverage to both LA County GMC and the USC Keck Medical Center, with a designated chaplain carrying the overnight pager for emergency calls. Prior to my arrival, Fr. Chris changed the service hours to 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. due to practical considerations. Serving USC Keck Medical Center often involved end-of-life support and the administration of Last Rites for Catholic patients.

After Fr. Chris's passing, St. Camillus has struggled to find a priest to lead daily Mass and simultaneously announced – painstakingly - that USC Keck Medical Center would be excluded from their ministry for an uncertain duration. As a result, the chaplain team's service hours have been further shortened to 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Due to the absence of many team members – caused by sudden medical issues requiring major surgeries, family circumstances, and pre-approved vacation plans - I was at times the only staff chaplain covering the hospital, with or without chaplain interns. My ability to participate in daily Palliative Care rounds has also been affected, and I am currently expected to attend only two days per week (Tuesday and Thursday).

Serving the Angel Interfaith Network (AIN)

I feel blessed to work with the leaders of AIN, whose compassionate hearts and effective leadership skills are outstanding. As a member of the leadership board, I served at the AIN booth during the Alternative Christmas Market at Shepherd of the Valley Presbyterian Church on November 23 and December 7, 2025.

I also received donated baby items at East Whittier Presbyterian Church on December 21, 2025, and delivered them to St. Camillus. In addition, I have been invited to First Presbyterian Church of Newhall to participate in their Blessing of Blankets ceremony on January 18, 2026.

Spiritual Support during the Christmas Party at the Infusion Center

I was invited to collaborate with a peer chaplain to offer an invocation to outpatient cancer patients during the annual Christmas Party on December 10, 2025. During the event, I encountered a palliative care patient whom I had previously met while she was battling a terminal illness marked by excruciating pain and fear of an uncertain future.

She had shared how distraught she had been throughout the year. Due to her illness, she was forced to quit her job, and with very limited financial means, walking in a neighborhood park became the only outdoor activity she could enjoy at no cost. Now, she spends most of her time hiding at home out of fear of arrest and deportation. The only time she leaves her home is to receive cancer treatment at the hospital.

Through tears, she expressed deep gratitude for the hospital and for the support from AIN, which she described as divine providence.

The Memorial Service for the Unclaimed Dead

The annual Memorial Service for the Unclaimed Dead took place at the LA County Crematorium and Cemetery on December 11, 2025. Its history dates back to year 1896, and this year marked the 129th burial. We honored 2,308 souls who passed away in 2022 without next of kin to claim them as loved ones.

Regardless of skin color, social status, or cultural background, all were united in returning to dust. Hundreds of guests from diverse communities attended, including LA County Supervisor Janice Hahn, who offered a welcoming address. Interfaith prayers were offered by clergy from Protestant Christian, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, and Native American traditions.

I was invited to offer the Lord's Prayer in Korean, one of the five languages represented (Italian, Spanish, Tamil, Korean, and English). Here is the link to the livestream recording: Ceremony of the Unclaimed Dead [Full Video](#) and [Stephanie Kang's Part](#).

Acts of Kindness – Blanket/Lap Robe Distribution

One of the first striking sights I encountered at both St. Camillus and the hospital chaplain office was stacks of blankets and lap robes in a variety of colors, designs, and textures. Whether quilted, knitted, or crocheted, each piece reflected unique beauty and warmth.

This year's Day of Acts of Kindness took place over two days – December 16 - 17, 2025 - due to a shortage of volunteers available to accompany the chaplain team to patient care units. Many patients were surprised and deeply moved, often rendered speechless by receiving such a special gift. Some requested prayers for healing as they received a blanket as a tangible expression of divine mercy and warmth.

One male patient in his mid-50s shared, “This is so special to me. I know I can never repay the people for their efforts, time, and hearts put into this blanket. It is priceless.”

Observing Leadership Practices in This Liminal Season

There have been attempts to designate separate interim leaders for the hospital chaplain team and St. Camillus Catholic Church. For St. Camillus, the chairperson of the church council - who had previously covered Fr. Chris' responsibilities during his sabbatical - volunteered to serve as interim leader until a new priest arrives. She openly expressed the stress of leading with limited influence, particularly in connecting with other Catholic leaders, due to being a woman in a system where men hold most positions of power and authority.

For the chaplain team, hospital administrators appointed a male Catholic deacon who has been one of the longest-serving chaplains at GMC. Because Fr. Chris had led nearly every event without delegating or sharing plans, this chaplain appeared overwhelmed by the responsibility of leading upcoming major annual events. During this period, he was diagnosed with a serious cardiac condition, urgently hospitalized, and required surgeries followed by extended medical leave.

Subsequently, an on-call Catholic priest - who had no prior experience planning or leading hospital chaplaincy events - was appointed as the next temporary leader. It is understandable that GMC administrators, especially those who have worked there for decades, continue the long-standing pattern of having a male Catholic minister lead chaplaincy events.

Personal Reflection on Being a Presbyterian

I intuitively sense that my identity as a woman and non-Catholic - while carrying a relatively strong background in hospital chaplaincy leadership - may create internal tension for those who wish to maintain the tradition of male Catholic leadership for the chaplain team.

As an appointed Presbyterian Chaplain, I acknowledge my role as both the ear and the voice of the Presbyterian Consortium and pray that my calling will contribute to edifying the true image of God through ministry to the marginalized. I continue to prayerfully explore God's calling each day - whether through bedside care, staff support at nursing stations, mentoring chaplain interns, attending interdisciplinary rounds, or covering colleagues' responsibilities in their absence.

I am reminded of Richard Rohr's metaphor of contemplative leadership as the Big River, symbolizing uncontrollable life circumstances. Rather than fighting the current, contemplative leaders allow themselves to float, trusting the water to carry them to places they have never been before. Though they acknowledge fear of the unknown, they choose to trust the Greater that moves the water, responding with hope rather than fear. Such leaders embody compassion and empathy toward those who are marginalized or less privileged.¹

Just before the New Year of 2026, I find myself standing on ground where I have never been before. Despite ongoing challenges, my gratitude continues to deepen as I recognize that this Presbyterian chaplain position has been established and sustained by countless people of God who pray and seek the Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. May our hearts be fully illuminated by the light of Christ in this special season of Christ's coming to us all.

Happy New Year to you all.

In Christ,
Stephanie

¹ Patrick Boland, *The Contemplative Leader: Uncover the Power of Presence and Connection*. Dallas, TX: Matt Holt Books, 2024.