

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. *Hebrews 13:2*

### **Angel in the Rubble**

Last week I went on my first trip in a long time. I can't remember the last time I was on an airplane. There were two trips to the East Coast in March and April that I cancelled; though I have been able to get stronger without any new episodes of bleeding, the possibility of bleeding is always in the back of my mind, and I did not want to be stuck on an airplane if it started again. But this week's work was in Seattle, and I thought the trip was short enough that I could do it—and thank God, I did.

I have been part of the training program for new executive presbyters, which includes a one-week residency in early May for three years. This year was special for several reasons. This was the first year that Karen Sapio came, along with two of her new Bay Area colleagues, Neal Presa (San Jose) and Laura Mariko Cheifetz (San Francisco). Neal and Laura are among the most visible leaders in the denomination, but neither has been on presbytery staff before. It is also the last year I will be teaching in the program, because the faculty is limited to active practitioners only, and the plan is for me to retire by the end of 2025 at the latest. This was the first time I had one of those “this is the last time I will do \_\_\_\_\_” feelings, and it was bittersweet, though I confess I do feel a sense of freedom, as well as grateful confidence in the staff that will continue to serve this Presbytery.

This was one of the greatest blessings out of my health troubles, how the rest of the staff proved that they can carry out much of the support of the Presbytery's ministry just fine. This will be a gift to you all, but also to my successor. This is also a timely gift, because it is likely that the Presbytery Executive Commission will launch the search for my replacement tomorrow—so keep your eyes open, and if you know anyone who has the potential to serve you productively, let them know!

There was one other very special characteristic of this year's program, and that was the joy shared by all the participants—almost 50 of them; the largest group of participants ever. I was with the third-year folks most of the week, including the initial check-ins. The folks were so upbeat in their check-ins that I asked a few of the folks during the break how it was that they were so happy? Were they just putting on a good face for us, or has presbytery work become much easier lately?

The folks assured me that they were authentic in their feelings, and that they have processed together some very difficult situations. Thanks to the initiative of two of the cohort members, the group has been meeting together on Zoom and at national church gatherings, so they have become a very tight, loving, mutually supportive set of colleagues. This was most impressive because in their first year, this group was so quiet (we faculty described their first-year stance as “deer in the headlights”) that we worried about them. We were delighted to see them arrive in the second year as a cohesive group, and this year they came as deep friends.

But as the participants told me, they have faced difficulties. In fact, even in the course of the week, one of the third-year cohort members had to leave because her husband had a heart attack, and a second-year participant was called away to say good-bye to her dying stepfather. And several people came to the training having suffered great losses this last year, including parents and, in two cases, brothers who died unexpectedly at a young age. However, their mutual care and solidarity was such that they could find joy in their gathering, joy that looked almost like defiance against despair. It made me hopeful for the future of the Church, because the shrinking of the national staff means presbyteries will be even more crucial to keeping the PC(USA) connectional.

We all have the opportunity to respond even to the hardest situations with mutual care and joy. A week ago last Friday, I followed my visit at the damaged apartment building with a visit to First AME Church in Pasadena, in order to apply for aid from the Red Cross. This turned out to be a 5-hour marathon, but the folks in line were very supportive of each other, the church volunteers were helpful, and the Red Cross volunteers were amazing, especially in their respectful and caring attitude even as they could see frustration levels rising.



There are so many random acts of kindness happening. Some members of Altadena Community Church were surprised to find a painting of an angel appear among the rubble, on one of the stubs of a wall. They do not know who painted it, but perhaps it was a visitor to the church, because one of the most beloved parts of their worship is a very active prayer time.

Presbytery executives gathering to consult and pray with each other . . . the many volunteers and others showing concern to victims of fire and other disasters . . . the countless anonymous individuals offering their gifts to people they will never meet—all these folks and others show that we can face trials of all kinds when we do it together. That togetherness can take all kinds of forms, even with total strangers—and indeed, those strangers might turn out to be angels.

As I often have said, we are blessed, that we may be a blessing to others. Let us give thanks for the opportunities to provide help, even to angels we do not know.

Peace,

*Wendy*