

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.
Romans 12:2

Discerning the Will of God

We just had the most full and fulfilling long weekend!

On Thursday and Friday nights, we held Zoom-based Summer Fest sessions, hearing from our own people who have been involved in significant changes in ministries in San Gabriel Presbytery, mostly in our congregations. On Thursday we heard from minister members Matt Colwell, Jessica Vaughan Lower, and Bryce Little about:

- the resurrection of Knox Presbyterian Church, which went from about 12 people worshipping on Sunday to hundreds of called and active members from all generations today,
- San Marino Community Church's responses to COVID, and what they've learned and carried forward in their current ministry, and
- the efforts in San Gabriel Presbytery to open our churches and church properties to newcomers to our communities, especially immigrants.

On Friday, people were inspired to hear from ruling elders and lay leaders Melinda Forbes, Cheryl Prentice, Arni Divinagracia, and Anthony Rutherford and Shawna Banks as they shared the steps they took to transform their ministries, including:

- the decision to partner with Habitat for Humanity to utilize much of the campus of the former First Presbyterian Church in Baldwin Park for affordable housing, while building a new house with two side units which the Presbytery will keep,
- some significant decisions made in La Casa de San Gabriel's history, shared by former Executive Director Cheryl Prentice, including partnering with the Gabrieleno-Tongva tribe and helping over 800 undocumented immigrants apply for amnesty in the 1980s,
- the shift in vision and mission made by Filipino Community United Presbyterian Church in Azusa, as they broadened their vision of community to include people of all races and LGBTQIA folks, seeking and partnering with their new pastor, Tracey Shenell, and
- the joining of the Bridge ministry in Arcadia and Westminster Presbyterian Church in Temple City to become Live Oak Community Church.

On Saturday, we made several significant decisions, including:

- welcoming Rev. Katherine Lee Baker as Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Pasadena; Rev. Dr. Stuart Gordon as Associate Pastor for Adult Spiritual Formation with San Marino Community Church; and approving the call of Rev. Dr. Duane Bidwell as Interim Pastor of Claremont Presbyterian Church
- honoring the ministry of Village Presbyterian Church in south Arcadia, and approving the Administrative Commission's recommendation that the church be closed
- receiving important information for churches on how to respond if customs agents come onto their church campus
- receiving position descriptions for three open positions with the Presbytery: Lead Chaplain for Retired Presbyterian Church Workers (full-time), Chaplain for Westminster Gardens (stipended for less than quarter-time), and Executive Presbyter (full-time)
- hearing a report on the use of over \$58,000 in funds received by the Presbytery for churches and individuals, especially the most vulnerable individuals, impacted by the Eaton Fire

- deciding to return the La Casa de San Gabriel property to the Gabrieleno-Tongva tribe as led by the Gabrieleno/Tongva Tribal Council, a nonprofit organization that has not only led their people but partnered with the community to serve the community, especially Los Angeles-based Native Americans from all tribes in need. The public worship and open house celebration will be held August 2, starting at 10 am, at La Casa.

We did vote on the amendments proposed by the 2024 General Assembly, though all of the amendments have already been ratified and go into effect this coming July 1. We also noted Pride Month with an offering for Pomona Valley Pride, a community agency serving the needs of LGBTQIA neighbors including mental health, mutual support, and advocacy work for young people and adults. And we installed Rev. Deidra Goulding as Vice Moderator and met and prayed for four young people who will be going to Presbyterian Youth Triennium in Louisville next month.

Immediately after the meeting, Rev. Jihyun Oh, Stated Clerk and Executive Director of the Interim Unified Agency, spoke on the trends she is seeing in the PC(USA), including a net gain of several thousand members (San Gabriel had a small net gain, not including new worshipping community members), reduction in spending and staffing at the national level, our traditional strengths in financial management and justice work, and the growing importance of partnerships—with other denominations and with non-profits to serve the community, and even being church together, so that different churches can offer their specific gifts while benefiting from partnership with others.

Fortified with inspiration from the last three days and a delicious lunch from Praise Community Church, our ever-gracious hosts, there was an enthusiastic sharing in small groups to express the strengths, needs, and hopes for San Gabriel Presbytery in this moment of transition. Peter Tan-Gatue shares the following top-line summary of the discussion's thoughts confirmed by the most people:

1. What have we done well?

Accompanying immigrants
Thinking outside the box

2. What are the needs?

Defending the rights of the oppressed
Encourage reconciliation at all levels – church, community, world
Younger generation
Cooperation/collaboration

3. Who is God calling us to be?

Defenders of the oppressed
Youth and children – celebrate and learn from churches with thriving kids/youth ministry
Merging presbyteries: discern if this is the time to do that.

There was a fourth question: “Where have we felt God’s presence?” that had a few answers but only one was confirmed: “Relevant real-world sermons/teachings.” I wasn’t in this discussion, but I wonder if the lack of responses is a reflection that folks ran out of time.

There was yet one more activity on Saturday, the Day of Service, which is our annual June event. As we have done every year, we compiled hygiene kits for LA County General Medical Center, and this time Chaplain Rev. Dr. Charity Ngaruiya was able to be with us, and she gave a presentation and led the group through a most compelling case study in biomedical ethics. A few hardy souls (including Jihyun Oh and Katherine Lee Baker) went to work and connect with leaders of the Gabrieleno-Tongva

tribe at La Casa, as they assess what is needed in terms of cleaning, repair, and transformation for their future dreams as a community center hosted by the tribe.

These last few days were filled with faithful obedience to God's will, inspiration from the history and future potential of the Presbytery, and a wonderful energy of fellowship and mutual appreciation for the gifts we have in each other. The Education, Equipping, and Empowerment Committee will review the feedback more intensely, and the Executive Presbyter Nominating Committee will incorporate these experiences in their description of the opportunities and needs that San Gabriel Presbytery will offer the next EP. Personally I can attest that San Gabriel has much to offer any new leader. Clearly, God is offering the Presbytery an abundance of hope and purpose for future ministry—thank you, Lord!

And Happy Juneteenth! Let us take time this Thursday to remember God's liberating ways for Hebrew slaves escaping Egypt, for African-Americans forced and able to build the infrastructure of this nation, for people of all races fleeing their homes due to everything from war to gang violence to political persecution to natural disaster including the Eaton Fire, and for all of us freed from the bondage of sin and fear thanks to the love of God in Jesus Christ. And may the bold obedience of our ancestors in faith embolden us to follow Christ's call, and recognize the rightness of God's will that is stronger than the terrors of these days.

Giving thanks for all of you,

Wendy