

Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

*Acts 17:4*

### **Leading Women**

As Presbytery staff, my preaching schedule runs roughly opposite of most pastors. I often joke that I am rarely asked to fill in during the holidays, especially Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter, because that's when the pastors earn their keep. But I have offered to churches that I will preach once a year to give the pastors—and the church budgets—a little relief. So I tend to preach more during the summer, when the pastors are on vacation. This month, I've preached at three churches, and it's been a joy to see how folks are doing.

Yesterday I preached at Filipino Community United Presbyterian Church (FCUPC) in Azusa, as Tracey Shenell has been on vacation. Because I'm always worried that I will get the worship time wrong, I looked at their Facebook page, and was thrilled to see how active they have been, including two large teams doing a work day with Habitat for Humanity (one team on a worksite in Azusa, the other at a ReStore nearby), and an upcoming beach cleanup day. At the church, several elders shared how much they love Tracey, and this coming Sunday, they are going to meet to decide on a new name for the church, which has been a long-time topic of discussion as the church looks to broaden their ministry to include all of the Azusa community, which means multiple races, LGBTQ folks, immigrants, and families. How exciting to see this loving, vibrant community achieve some long hoped-for dreams with their new pastor! I shared with them that later that day, the Presbytery would be installing Elizabeth Wang as pastor of First Presbyterian Church Altadena, so we can celebrate the great gifts of our women pastors in San Gabriel Presbytery, including now Tracey and Elizabeth.

Tracey is using Wil Gafney's *Women's Lectionary* for worship, so she assigned to me Acts 17:1-7, which included this reference to Paul's ministry with the leading women of the Thessalonian community. I am much more familiar with Acts 16, which recounts Paul's encounter with Lydia and also the unnamed prophesying enslaved young woman, and I shared with the Azusa folk how a clear mark of the spread of the Christian faith has been the empowering impact on women. Just in Acts 16 and 17, Paul doesn't just meet several women, but they represent wildly different classes: a businesswoman, a slave, and these unnamed "leading women"—I surmise these are women who have influence in the community. As a professor at Fuller said many years ago, it makes total sense that women usually outnumber men in church attendance, as Jesus' ministry gave respect and added purpose to women in revolutionary ways, regardless of background or social status.

The installation service in Altadena went well, and I was happy to see several members of the Presbytery in attendance. I filled the pulpit at Altadena during Lent, not long after Elizabeth started, and I could see the renewed energy at the church, especially with a Lenten Bible study that Elizabeth organized, with several church members acting as small group facilitators for the study. Elizabeth asked Mariko Yanagihara to give the charge to her, and she asked me to give the charge to this, my family church. This church has a long history of leading women, including my aunt Sophie Toriumi, and several clergywomen who have been ordained in connection with this church. Mariko was ordained at Altadena a few decades ago, Ellen Tanouye and I were formed by the church prior to being ordained elsewhere, Stephanie Kang was ordained there, and now Elizabeth Wang has been installed as their pastor (after having two excellent interim pastorates with Ann Oglesby-Edwards and Vikki Randall). It wasn't until the evening that I found out that Joe Biden had ended his

reelection campaign and has fully endorsed Kamala Harris to run for President, and the Democratic Party seems to have coalesced in support of Harris within hours.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has been ordaining women for so long that I need to be reminded that many denominations still do not allow women to follow the call they discern. We have benefited from the rigidity of other traditions, as many women (and now several LGBTQ leaders and their allies) gratefully come our way, that they might serve Christ's church in ordained ministry as they feel led. What a gift! It would be hard to measure what would happen to our ministry efforts if we lost our women teaching elders—not to mention ruling elders and deacons!

Being a more inclusive church is not just a statement; as more of God's children feel welcomed into our churches, our ministry becomes stronger, broader, and more versatile with their contributions. Thanks be to God! AMEN.

Your sister in Christ,

*Wendy*