

REFLECTIONS ALONG THE WAY

Dear friends,

Earlier generations of ecumenists lacked a strategy that's indispensable in my work: electronic eavesdropping. It might look as if I am mindlessly scrolling Twitter and Facebook, but trust me, I'm taking notes. Social media reveals so much about the culture of diverse Christian traditions. By following clergy and lay leaders, I get a close-up glimpse of the polity, the relationships, the quarrels, and the inside jokes that make each tradition unique. I catch a close up look at the celebrations, the struggles, the unresolved questions, the camaraderie.

And sometimes, I stand as a witness to grief.

In February, the American Baptist community learned that the Rev. David Smith Van Brakle, Associate Regional Pastor in New Jersey, had died at age 40, leaving his wife and two young sons. Every Baptist I follow had a memory of David: smiling in his group photos, goofing off in private chat messages during serious Zoom calls, encouraging vocation and extending opportunities for ministry.

In early March, the death of Canon Anna Matthews, age 44, rocked the Church of England. Tributes across the Internet remembered her as a priest of deep holiness and wisdom, a gifted preacher and liturgist, one who gladly mentored others and shared generously of herself.



Rev. David Smith Van Brakle



Canon Anna Matthews

Both David and Anna had accomplished much, still early in their careers. Both seem to have been universally regarded as gifted and faithful. Both had many, many friends and admirers.

Both died by suicide.

Knowing these stories only from a distance, it would be presumptuous and offensive to draw conclusions about David and Anna's particular experiences. Their lives deserve to be remembered on their own merits, not offered up as cautionary tales.

So, let me simply affirm: it's hard out there right now. It's hard preaching to echoing empty space and pews full of pre-pandemic ghosts. It's hard to keep trust in abundance when scarcity seems more realistic. It's hard to cope with collective anxiety that seeks a convenient target.

The world outside the church is hard too: an uncertain economy, a warming climate, a generation sandwiched by care for children and care for elders. It's hard to be professional bearers of hope when our own hope can feel so small.

Friends, I pray you know that you are loved. The overwhelming grief I overheard for David and Anna reflects the genuine care with which they were held in life, and similar networks of care support all of us. Your community, your colleagues, your friends, your family, the people whom you serve – they may show it imperfectly sometimes, but you matter to them. You are loved.

I pray, too, that you know there are avenues for help. If you are struggling, reach out. Our community is blessed by resources such as Pittsburgh Pastoral Institute, Samaritan Counseling Guidance Consulting, and Anchorpoint Counseling that offer mental health services sensitive to the perspectives of faith. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24 hours per day by calling 988. You can find support.

And finally, I pray that you know, in this Easter season, that you are held by a greater Love: a Love that wrestled Death itself and came up victorious. A Love that holds David and Anna, and holds you and me. *Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Even in the midst of heartache, Christ is risen. Amen and alleluia!

Your sister in Christ,

The Rev. Liddy Barlow
Executive Minister
Christian Associates of Southwest PA

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Christ is risen.
Amen and alleluia!*