



Intro: You're listening to Crossings Conversations from Church Divinity School of the Pacific, a show about leaders creating Christian community and sharing God's love.

Erin Wiens St. John: This is Erin Wiens St. John from Church Divinity School of the Pacific. I'm here with Angela Furlong, a second-year M.Div student at CDSP. Angela, welcome.

Angela Furlong: Thank you. Good to be here.

Erin: I'm really excited to get to do this interview with you since I've just really appreciated your presence on campus for so long this last semester that I've been here. I'm just excited to get to know you better, and I'm really excited for the folks in the CDSP community to get to know you better as well.

Angela: Thank you.

Erin: Angela, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and where you're from?

Angela: Hi, I'm Angela Furlong, and I am a second-year M.Div student at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California. I come from the Diocese of Maryland, where I am a postulant for Holy Orders. I live normally in Frederick, Maryland, but I am currently residing in residence at CDSP in Berkeley.

Erin: Great. I really appreciate just the chance to get to know you a little bit more through this interview. I just want to start off with a question that you have encountered in the classroom that sparked curiosity related to your ministry and/or your vocation.

Angela: This was quite a question for me because we're asked a lot of questions, and we are asked to do a lot of discerning throughout our seminary careers. I think that the most impactful question that I hold on to is the question, "What do you think?" It seems like a very simple question, but it is a profound one because CDSP focuses a lot on

contextual awareness and discernment. As pastors, we are called to help others discern God's call and their own theologies.

To have us discern what we think, and why we think, and to process through how we think those things, is profound, and I think, very applicable to our future ministries.

Erin: It strikes me a lot that priests are asked a lot, "What do you think?" And their answer carries a lot of weight for the people who are asking those questions. Getting used to that experience sounds like it's been really important for you so far.

Angela: Indeed. Also, I think it's such a gift to be able to share in the stories, our own stories, and the stories of others, and communally develop our own theologies and our relationships with each other and with God.

Erin: As you talk about developing those relationships to go out into the world, that makes me wonder what one event or issue that's happening in the world that's impacted how you view ministry today?

Angela: COVID is clearly the elephant in the room here. It has impacted all of us in so many ways, and, most especially, ministry. Everything went entirely online, our social lives went online, our worship lives went online. For some of us, our family lives went online. I moved across the entire country, from coast to coast, literally, to attend seminary. I homeschooled my twins their entire lives. This has been the longest time I've been away from them.

When I got here, the original intention was to be in a closed, what I imagined as a monastic community with my fellow seminarians, but as the death toll rose, in the pandemic, we immediately went into a lockdown. I moved across the country into an efficiency apartment, knowing no one out here. I was in complete isolation. Even the streets were empty around here for a very long time. I think the biggest part of ministry that I was keenly aware of is our outreach to shut-ins because I suddenly found myself in a position where I was socially isolated. I didn't know anybody, and most people when I came here, were already in an established community with each other. I started imagining what must life be like for people who were this isolated before the pandemic, and so invisible in society. That feeling of invisibility is painful. I think it did a lot, as hard as it was with the isolation, it did a lot for my own personal awareness of those who might be invisible in our society.

I think also that while I have never preferred being online, doing anything online, most especially reading so much online. While it might have first served as the bane of my own existence, in the beginning, I also see it as a blessing to people who are normally shut-in and don't have access to worship and social activities now having this newfound access. It feels to me that we have planted an online church through the move to technology.

Erin: Yes, absolutely. It's a whole new phase in the church's development. I appreciate what you're saying, as the church having a ministry to shut-ins because I just think that COVID-19 has given all of us a new eye to understanding what the isolated experience is like. I have a sense that that's a really important thing for the next generation of priests to be realizing especially. I'm curious how all of this relates back to your overall question, "What do you think?" And how that impacts your response and experience?

Angela: I think a lot, and it takes me a while to put it into words. Usually I'm very contemplative by nature, but I think there is a lot of pain and suffering in the world and that we can use our awareness of that to make this world a better place. It's such a tangled web, but I wanted to go back to one of the impacts of ministry this pandemic has brought about in the world. I'm involved in an ecumenical ministry in Hyderabad, India. Hyderabad and Panora, and when the pandemic struck, I became keenly aware also of the caste system in India and those most devastatingly impacted by the pandemic.

We are involved with a pastor in Hyderabad who offers free computer classes to the poorest in Hyderabad in that area, and his wife was running an orphanage. They joined together with my intern parish in Frederick, so we've brought several areas together through this, and now through the seminary, to provide food for the families who lost any hope for survival with COVID because they were the lowest cast and they were typically day laborers counting only on the day's wages to eat one meager meal each day.

This pandemic gave us an opportunity to work with the community in Hyderabad entrepreneur, through technology to offer food and clothing. CPSPs involvement has been through the Celtic cross grant. I applied for and was awarded a grant to help the community there secure a building that has become their focus for their community. It is where they attend their worship services, where they receive food, clothing, social services, healthcare, everything, and they were threatened to lose the building. All of the hardships of this pandemic, there are so many blessings also in the partnership.

Erin: Yes. It sounds like you're taking your thinking and putting it into action, which is ultimately the goal of our life with Christ and that's really beautiful. I was going to ask what has been a creative or experimental ministry opportunity that you've explored over the last year that's been inspirational. Maybe you just gave me the answer or maybe there's something else that you want to talk about.

Angela: Well actually what brought to mind, what that question brought to mind for me is as I tried to process through my own struggles through the pandemic, trying to take care of my adult children from across the country and trying to deal with the isolation of being here and not knowing anybody and then diving into the challenging coursework of seminary at the same time. I'm an artist so I started coping with it through art and processing what I saw as brokenness in society and in individuals and how that brokenness manifested itself in our interactions online.

Or even if we met up and walked through the empty city and talked about how we were coping with the pandemic. I started making these kintsugi eggs to illustrate the brokenness of our individuality, but the beauty within that brokenness, and I used imitation gold leafing to mend the shells back together, symbolizing the mending and healing of my person.

Now that I am offering it to others to symbolize their own mending in whatever way they need mending and then I would put a prayer inside the egg before mending it together that that symbol would hold onto and I made different eggs one symbol, a rainbow egg symbolizing God's covenant with God's people. Another one was a Pentecost egg. I moved through the church seasons with these eggs and since then I have created a mini-retreat based on my kintsugi eggs that had incorporates guided meditation, and the native American flute, and the artful expression of and healing.

Erin: Yes, I'm just struck by the richness of all of the symbols that you just mentioned in that last answer. We were just writing a paper in Intro to Worship on symbols and worship. I'm sure you remember that paper. And I'm just really moved by what the strength of your symbology is, and also your strength in taking symbology and bringing it into the present.

Oftentimes really powerful symbols in our churches get stuck in the past and no one really knows what they mean anymore or why they're there and I just really appreciate you bringing all of that symbology into the present moment. It seems like a beautiful gift through your art.

Angela: Thank you and I think the biggest focus on that whole artistic expression is loving-kindness. Allowing the Holy Spirit to come in and gild our wounded edges and make beautiful our brokenness and to offer ourselves and each other loving kindness because this is hard and we need each other to get through this.

Erin: This is hard and thank God for the Holy Spirit.

Angela: Yes. Amen.

Erin: Where do you see God calling you to live into your vocation beyond this seminary experience?

Angela: Honestly, I'm going with the spirit right now. I have no sense of where precisely I'll go, but I go forth willingly and humbly, and wherever the spirit takes me, I'm open to it. My main thing is to go through the world illuminating the belovedness of each and every individual.

Erin: If we can all do that, then I think we'll be good priests.

Angela: Well, it can be quite challenging sometimes, but I just feel like it's important. Love is a binding agent, and it's a basic human need, so I think it's vital that we focus on it.

Erin: Yes, absolutely. Love is at the center is presiding Bishop Curry loves to say, right?

Erin: One element that you bring to life at CDSP that's, I think, unique among anyone else that I know of who's here is your experience as a veteran, and I'm wondering how your sense of vocation to the military, if you would have called it a vocation, or if not, your experience in that time feeds into your vocational experience now and your call to seminary?

Angela: I can particularly apply it to my journey through COVID, my personal journey through COVID, and the shutdown because, as you are aware, I was an Arabic linguist during the Gulf War way back, and being in the military during wartime and particularly being in a field where for one thing, women were a minority. You deal with a lot of rawness in people and their reactions to challenging scenarios, and there isn't a lot of time for premeditated speech when you're in the moment, or emotional reactivity. I think going through seminary during COVID and seeing how people emotionally respond to the tremendous difficulties of coping with death and separation, and a loss of control, which pretty much is what wartime is like and was definitely signature of our journey through COVID and trying to keep everyone safe and make the right decisions to do with the least amount of harm.

I think having that military background did help me in understanding the humanity in people and embracing it. I think that might be a good word for it, not judging people for their humanity. I think the hardest part for me has been allowing myself the same humanity. Going through the pandemic, I often offer love and kindness to others without regard to love and kindness for myself, and I needed that same pastoral care myself. I had to give myself permission to do so. Does that make sense?

Erin: Yes, absolutely. I'm really moved by your relation of what we might, in modern times today, call trauma responses that come up in the military and in wartime to the trauma responses that COVID has induced, and of course, all the trauma responses that we will encounter as priests because I think sometimes priests have a front-row seat to those in ways that other people may not and the value in, as you say, being able to see other people's humanity through that and, of course, learning to extend that to ourselves, as well, just all of that strikes me as a really important foundational skill set that people might not see the connections between those two careers that you have had and are having, and yet how related they really are.

Angela: Yes, definitely.

Erin: We started out this conversation by talking about the question, what do you think. I want to ask what do you think about— a major question that CDSP is grappling with, and all seminaries are grappling with, but CDSP, in particular, I think has taken on the

challenge, which is the challenge of church decline, which is so much more evident on this coast than it is on the other one, although it is evident across America now. What it looks like to live in a society where Christianity is more on the margins, again, as it was in the early church, to midwife a church through the trauma responses that come from being decentered from American society. I'm just curious to ask, what do you think about all of that?

Angela: I think that in the physical sanctuary of our church buildings, we might be experiencing church decline, but I also believe wholeheartedly that we just need to shift our lens, our focus, and to look at the participation differently. Many of us can see on a Sunday morning, if we zoom in, how many more people are attending church online. We need to figure out how to account for those very valuable and important people who are finding agency in their worship practice through Zoom. We need to be able to look outside our church doors, walk through our communities, and maybe bring church to people out there because just because they aren't sitting in our pews does not mean that they aren't Christian. I also recognize personally people's life situations that might prevent them from being able to go into the physical sanctuaries. For whom, we might be able to establish sanctuary elsewhere.

Erin: That ties back into what I heard you saying before about thinking about shut ins differently for the first time in people with chronic illnesses. I really identify with that because before the pandemic, I was too sick to go to church for about a year and a half. When the pandemic started and everything went online, it was a massive relief to suddenly have access to live streams every single week which I hadn't had before.

Well, Angela, thank you so much for joining us on Crossing Conversations. It's been a pleasure for me to get to know you better and to bring your experiences to the broader CDSP community.

Angela: Thank you very much for having me and it's so good to see you.

Outro: Crossings Conversations is a co-productions of Church Divinity School of the Pacific and Trinity Church Wall Street. If you enjoyed the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts or share it with a colleague. You can more about the only Episcopal seminary on the west coast and subscribe to Crossings Magazine at cdsp.edu