

## **E. Suzanne Wille**

### **2024 All Saints Annual Meeting: The Eras Tour**

As we prepared for this annual meeting,  
As I prepared to write my Rector's address for today,  
I thought about this past year,  
I reviewed my monthly Rector Reports to vestry  
And agendas for weekly staff meetings,  
And I noticed persistent questions:  
What is a church for?  
What is All Saints for,  
What are we to be doing?

And a theme arose: Connection. Community.

We often say among the staff  
That the purpose of All Saints  
Is to help people connect to God,  
To one another,  
And to strengthen each of us  
To do the work God is giving us to do.

When I tell people  
What my "elevator pitch" is  
For church in general,  
For All Saints in particular,  
I say that this is the last place in our society  
Where we'll love you  
Just because you show up,  
Not because you're particularly  
Smart or beautiful or accomplished,  
Not because you have money,  
But just because  
you are made in God's image  
And are here.

Neither of those are perfect  
Descriptions or mission statements,  
But they're what I hear  
From you, over and over again.  
When we ask people who have been here  
For a long time why All Saints matters,  
One of the top reasons is, well, YOU, the community here.  
When I meet with newcomers  
And ask why they've come to All Saints,

They invariably say they are looking for community,  
or something larger than themselves,  
Something rooted in history and tradition.  
Many say that they are lonely,  
Some new to this big city,  
many without extended family.

I've been noodling over this,  
Trying to come up with an apt metaphor,  
One stronger than the generic "community" or "family,"  
And, then, I fell right into it,  
The perfect metaphor: *Refugia*.

Now, *refugia* is a biological term  
describing places of shelter  
where life endures in times of crisis,  
such as a volcanic eruption or a fire.  
Ideally, these *refugia* endure, expand, and connect so that new life emerges.

But I came across the term  
From an English professor at Calvin College,  
Who has a podcast *Refugia: a Podcast about Renewal*  
and written the book *Refugia Faith*.

In her book, Rienstra gives examples  
Of biological *refugia*,  
Such as Mt. St. Helens,  
Which erupted in 1980,  
Losing 1,300 feet of height  
And turned into a moonscape of hot ash and debris.  
Scientists thought it would take generations  
For life to return; however,  
Only 40 years later,  
Mt. Saint Helens is covered in lush green—  
Grasses, bushes, and trees—  
Streams run, and creatures have homes.  
And this growth began almost right away,  
Because there were some protected places—  
Moss and fern protected by rotting logs,  
Boulders protecting the holes and tunnels  
Of small creatures.  
These little pockets of safety are *refugia*.  
In them life endured,  
then flourished to spread outward.

This is a fascinating idea,  
And I've gone down some rabbit holes  
Learning more about *refugia*,  
But this is a Rector's address,  
Not a biology lecture.

Professor Rienstra is an environmentalist  
And is very interested in biological *refugia*,  
But at the top of each of her podcasts,  
She says this:

**Refugias** are places of shelter where life endures in times of crisis. From out of these small sanctuaries, life reemerges and the world is renewed. We're exploring what it means of people of faith to be people of refuge. How can we create safe places of flourishing, micro counter cultures where we gain strength and spiritual capacity to face the challenges ahead?

And that, it seems to me,  
Is what we have here at All Saints.

In a time and a culture  
That is in crisis—  
An angry, adversarial political culture,  
Rising authoritarianism around the world,  
A seemingly endless series of crises,  
Entrenched structures of racism,  
Militarism that overrides care  
For individual humans,  
An epidemic of loneliness and,  
For many, a sense of hopelessness,  
Well, we NEED spaces of refuge,  
Of new growth,  
Spaces that focus on the human,  
Focus on the goodness of creation,  
Places where we can be nurtured and strengthened.

And I would argue that's what we have here:  
A place of flourishing, a micro counter culture  
where we gain strength and spiritual capacity  
to face the challenges ahead.

When I look back over this past year,  
I see *refugia* everywhere:  
Places of growth and renewal,  
Where the small can be nurtured  
So that it might spread.

Our Atrium is a natural *refugium*.  
In our classrooms,  
Children are cared for so beautifully  
By our adult leaders,  
Allowed to explore and learn  
At their own pace and in their own space.  
I think of the pageant,  
Which is anything but small and quiet,  
But which provided a moment so beautiful  
That I keep thinking about it:  
Our boys being joined  
By some of our adult men  
To sing and dance together,  
Demonstrating a way  
To be manly that is funny and vulnerable,  
Rather than puffed up or violent.

I look to the small ways  
We're caring for creation:  
Our Green Team making sure  
That we use reusable or compostable goods  
For coffee hour and other times of fellowship,  
The Atrium garden where children  
Learn how to grow vegetables  
To share with our food pantry,  
our new pollinator garden  
On the south side of 4546.

We create *refugia*  
When we gather together  
For no purpose other than, well,  
BEING together,  
Strengthening our friendship and love  
For one another,  
As we learn together  
And get to know one another  
In Episcopal 101,  
Parables at the Annex,  
Or preparing in Advent  
Using the book *All Creation Waits*  
With adults online  
And with our children  
in our own homes and the Atrium.

We gather at newcomer lunches,  
Share stories at Bread, Wine, and Word,  
Break bread together at our  
Not-the-Last-Supper Lenten Suppers,  
And sing together every Sunday,  
And at Hymns in the Courtyard  
And Beer and Carols at the Annex.

We nurture one another when we're in need:  
Sharing our burdens at the monthly Caregivers Connection;  
Love on a Plate takes meals  
To folks after the birth of a baby  
Or an illness;  
One of you taking the time  
To drive another to a doctor's appointment  
Or to weekly chemotherapy.

Each of these is a tender place,  
Providing nourishment  
In a world too often lonely,  
Too often hostile to connection.

I could keep going, of course,  
But I want to invite YOU to participate.

Where do experience *refugia* at All Saints—  
New life, new hope, nourishment for your soul,  
A strengthening for you to be out in the world?  
Turn to someone near you,  
Even better if you didn't come with them,  
And take a minute to share with one another  
The *refugia* you find here.

All of these are places of shelter,  
Nourishing life so that it might spread.

Late last fall, we attended our deanery meeting  
With clergy from 10 neighboring parishes.  
We all felt overwhelmed,  
wondering how  
To care for the migrants  
Who have been bussed to Chicago.  
But as we talked,  
We learned that each one of us  
Was doing something to provide refuge—  
A clothes closet, meals, here at All Saints

Annie Logue led us in collecting winter coats,  
And a number of you gave money,  
Shopped, or cooked to provide breakfast  
For our new neighbors living  
At the 20th police precinct.  
None of it is perfect or total,  
But suddenly we learned  
That there were 10 *refugium*,  
Pockets spreading outwards,  
Connecting up to create a greenway of hope.

This is how it works,  
Small, precious places and people,  
Nurturing what the machine  
Of culture and industry  
Run roughshod over.

What we do week in and week out—  
Taking time for worship and prayer,  
Learning and fellowship—  
That ALL matters.  
THAT is countercultural,  
Insisting that God is most important,  
Reminding ourselves that we trust  
In God, giving thanks to God,  
And caring for those—  
Our families, our neighbors—  
God has given us.

This year we have had  
So much green spring up,  
As we welcome old members  
Back to regular worship,  
As we welcome new members,  
As we baptized 12 babies and 3 adults,  
Married five couples,  
And we find that our average Sunday attendance  
Has increased by 15% since 2022.

And in sorrow,  
We find refuge, too,  
As we grieved and celebrated and buried  
Three of our beloved parishioners  
Julie Donalek,  
Clyde Propost,  
And Mickey Safranek.

And supported beloved  
Parishioners Judith and Diane  
As they buried their dear Pat.  
May their souls,  
And the souls of all the departed,  
Through the mercy of God,  
Rest in peace.

We are blessed  
To be part of this place,  
This *refugia*  
In the midst of a world in crisis.

But here's the thing.  
*Refugia* are not bunkers  
Or walled off refuges.  
No, they have permeable boundaries,  
The door is always open,  
So that the growth spills outwards,  
So that we who are  
strengthened here  
Are strengthened to go out and change the world.

And so, here I think is the challenge of this year:  
Grow and strengthen the *refugia* here  
So that we might be even stronger  
In faith and love.  
This upcoming year promises to be a tough one;  
I don't think I need to outline the details.

So we need flourish deeply and faithfully here,  
Not just for our sakes,  
But for the sake of our community, city, and world.  
To do that, I think every single one of us  
Needs to be part of a small group at All Saints.  
That might be a group that gathers to pray together,  
It might be a group that gathers for a meal  
Or to volunteer together,  
But none of us should be on our own.  
Rather, we need to be strengthening our bonds.  
Stay tuned in the upcoming months for opportunities  
To join a small group  
Or gather your own!

The second challenge is this:  
How are we here,  
We graced to be part of this place  
Of nourishment and community,  
Going to spread that love and hope into the world, now?  
That's the discussion we plan to have  
At some gatherings in the next few months  
Where hope to connect with one another  
And to discern where God is calling us  
Next in the world.  
Please make time to come  
To one of those conversations.

We know how to do these things,  
How to nurture relationships here,  
How to turn our compassion outwards to the world—  
We've done it, are doing it,  
But the world needs people  
Of faith and hope and love now more than ever  
To be strong at our core  
And outward in our actions.

Thank you for being a people of *refugia*.  
Thank you for being a people of hope,  
A countersign to a world gone mad.  
I couldn't be happier or prouder  
To serve among you as your rector,  
And I can hardly wait to see  
How we grow this year!

I give thanks for you, for All Saints,  
in the Name of the God  
Who created us, redeems us, and is loving us still. Amen.



## THANKS

Now is the time for giving thanks to a few specific people!

As the time grows short, let me just point to a few people who made this meeting possible—you can see the full list on the back cover of the Annual Report.

Please stand as I call your name; the rest of us, hold applause until the end:

- Susie Griffith who took on the task of organizing this whole shebang.
- Jack Garland who is always willing to emcee and craft videos for the sake of All Saints.
- Katie and Zach Alexander who wrestled all our reports and photos into a lovely annual report.
- Allie Colina, John Dufour, and Gretchen Schlabach who made sure our powerpoint was, well, on point.
- Lesley Rivers who turned a years worth of photos into an end-of-year video, which you'll see soon.
- Joe and David Wernette-Hernden who made sure we had delicious food to sustain us for this meeting.
- Allison Loecke and Colin Collette for providing a Swift atmosphere with decorations and supplies for friendship bracelets.
- Courtney Reid and Doug Renkenberger who made sure we followed the rules and included our friends on Zoom.
- Our AV Team—Kuo, Lelia, Josephine, and Eileen—who had to run a lot of wires and do tech things I don't understand so we could have sound and video, all at the same time.
- There are many, many others of course, but lets give a huge round of applause for these folks!

As fun as the Annual Meeting is, the heart of it is in reporting on the business of the church, and the folks who are in charge of the business of the church are the Vestry. Please stand as I call your name: Wardens **Susie** and **Katrina**, members **Doug, Nina, Gina, Chad, Ann, Jacqueline, Craig, John, and Skip**. Treasurer **Margaret Ferguson** and Clerk **June Coyne**. What a fun, prayerful, hardworking group—thank you for leading All Saints during this era!

**Finally, a number of folks deserve our thanks as they leave their posts.**

### **Margaret Ferguson / treasurer**

Margaret is an old hand at leadership at All Saints, serving on vestry, then as Co-Warden, then wrangled into the official position of treasurer after years of being responsible for reporting on our financials. Margaret makes sure the numbers make sense, provides support when we in the office mess things up, and keeps us all calm. I am so grateful, Margaret, that you were here to help me learn the ropes of our complicated finances and then stayed on for an extra year. Heck, we even changed our by-laws to keep you longer! You have served selflessly, and I hate the thought of reading our P&L or balance sheets without you!

In this bag is the gift that all those leaving will get—a gift certificate to Spacca Napoli—but there is also an icon of *St. Jude*. Many of you know that *St. Jude* is the patron saint of lost causes, whom you ask for help when all seems hopeless; he's also the patron saint of financial tribulations. When we had some financial tangles and then faced two large loans that needed figuring out, well, I didn't call on *St. Jude* b/c I had Margaret. But may *Jude* remind you that nothing is impossible with God. Thank you, Margaret!

## **Vestry Members:**

### **Jacqueline WayneGuite**

Jacqueline served two years of her second term but, unfortunately, due to health issues in her family, has had to resign from Vestry before her term is over and isn't able to be with us today, but I hope she is watching online. Jacqueline is faithful to All Saints in so many ways and has been a voice for justice on the Vestry, reminding us always to remember those we might be forgetting as we make decisions. In her bag is an icon of *The Mother of God: Protectress of the Oppressed*; may she strengthen you to keep challenging us and the world to protect those the world overlooks.

### **Doug Renkenberger**

Doug gamely agreed to serve the last year of Katrina's vestry term when she became co-warden and has been so faithful to our work, volunteering to act as clerk when needed, sharing his long experience as a leader at his last church, and his rational, objective point of view as an architect. For you, Doug, I have an icon of Jesus Christ the Divine Architect, who ensures the order of the world, just as you contributed to the order of our vestry meetings. Thank you!

### **Nina Wilfred**

I have known Nina since I was a member here over 20 years ago, and I was grateful for her gentle good humor then and am so thrilled to have had her wisdom and cheer on vestry these past years. Nina listens carefully, humbly offers her opinion, shares her long experience at All Saints, and, somehow, is always in good spirits. For you, Nina, I have a picture of the icon that didn't quite make it in time for the meeting: The parable of the mustard seed showing a large bush filled with birds grown from a small seed to honor how your humble sharing at Vestry has born great fruits and, also, your love of birds! Thank you!

### **Gina Shropshire**

Gina has served All Saints in so many ways—Vestry, Queen of All Saints Day and the Day of the Dead, Diva of Sparkling Sundays, and much more. But what she brings to Vestry is unending good will and hope, a spirit of reconciliation and healing. No matter what we face, Gina trusts that we'll figure it out and offers great ideas for how to get there. She is prayerful and kind and helps us to stay real by being willing to share her own vulnerabilities. It helps that Gina is a therapist, and for you, Gina, I have an icon of the Archangel Raphael whose name means "God has healed" and who is identified with healing; thank you for being a model of hope and healing for us. Thank you!

**Co-Warden Susie Griffith**

And, now, for the big finish! Thank you, Susie, for all the ways you have loved and cared for this place over the decades that you and Scott have been at All Saints. When I was here two decades ago, I thought you and Scott were so glamorous, which you are, but in the past few years, I have been so grateful for your “can do” spirit, your creativity, your relentlessly type A personality, and organizational skills. It has been a gift to share leadership with you, and I know the Vestry and I have leaned on you hard these past two years. I will miss your “yes, and . . .” enthusiasm and your “but, no” clarity. For you, I have an icon of Rublev’s Trinity, one of my favorites. Here, we see God as God is: three in one, a community of love, a party of three with an open seat, always inviting us in. And that’s you: a leader who is up for anything, but always ready to invite one more in. Thank you for modeling how to lead humbly, collaboratively, and faithfully. You’re the best. Thank you!

I will miss each one of you terribly and promise to leave you alone . . . for a bit. Let’s give them all a giant thanks for their service.