



## **Dangers Lurking Inside**

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We still have a few boxes to unpack. You might have heard that my daughter and her family moved with us, using the same storage pods. So, we had to sort boxes by household. My daughter recently opened a box that I had packed and labeled “toys.” Opening the box, she found stuffed animals on top, just as one might expect. Digging deeper, she found my 1-year-old granddaughter’s blanket, rolled up and heavy. Curious, my daughter slowly unrolled it to find...kitchen knives. Sharp knives. Packed in the toy box. “Really, Mom? Knives?!?”

I was taking advantage of every space in the moving boxes, you see. I didn’t expect that the label on the outside of the box might catch people unaware. I didn’t intend for anyone to be hurt sorting through the box. This story had a happy ending, even though I might never again be trusted to pack the kids’ toys.

Today I feel compelled though to take us to a darker place that isn’t funny or oops-worthy. It’s a place that we heard about yesterday at the Presbytery meeting.

Rev. Julie Kandema, an International Peacemaker, joined our meeting to keynote the education program and lead worship. Rev. Kandema is an ordained minister from the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda (EPR), who leads the church program supervising evangelization, women and youth activities, deacons, and Sunday school. Since 2014 she has served as vice president and deputy legal representative of the church. She serves on commissions at a national and international level, organizing interreligious dialogues and peace and reconciliation activities.

Rev. Kandema spoke about the 1994 genocide in her country, including the painful complicity of the church. In that year, over 90% of Rwandans were Christian, the most Christian country of all the African nations. Despite that, in the genocide, Christians killed Christians. Church buildings were used to torture and murder people. Thousand of people were killed in the Catholic missions at Nyange and Ntarama. The first mission place of the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda at Remera and Kirinda did not escape the horrific killings, with long-serving pastors killed by members of their church. According to the human rights group African Rights, more victims died in churches than anywhere else. Like a box mislabeled as “toys,” many people sought refuge in the churches, only to find they contained instruments of death and suffering.

Hearing her remarks, I have wondered whether our churches can be boxes with dangers hidden inside. Could it be that we label them as family-friendly, but then frown as children “misbehave” during worship? Do we promise inclusivity – everyone’s welcome – but then keep our distance from transgendered people or same-gender couples? If we proclaim that all people are made in the image of God, then why do so many of the photos, drawings, and stained glass windows in our churches look like a narrow subset of God’s people? As we heard in our worship service yesterday, “The people can come, but we kinda want them to be like us.” The Church has been complicit in wounding people who come through its doors, and they are rightfully skeptical about the positive labels we give ourselves.

In Rwanda, the Church intentionally sought the forgiveness of the people. Just two years after the genocide, it publicly confessed to its failure to oppose the dividing forces openly and for permitting the tragedies to occur on its watch. Since then, it has continued efforts to rebuild trust in the Church, to seek reconciliation, and to intentionally repair the harm to victims. Of course, the Church wasn’t the exclusive perpetrator, but it takes seriously its Christian duty to bring peace and healing to all people. I am grateful for the witness to peacebuilding that Rev. Kandema offers us: confession, repentance, reconciliation, and repair. The steps are there for us to follow.

