

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Ordination and Retirement, Freedom to Choose

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I am a sixty-six year old retired priest, married for forty-three years, who, more than four years ago, moved from the Midwest to the Northwest to be close to our three sons and five grandchildren.

Last year I made the agonizing decision to resign after nine months as a part-time interim vicar. As much as I did not want to feel guilty about this decision, I did. One inner voice told me I should have stayed at least a year, as I had promised. Another told me, "It is all right, you did nothing wrong, the agreement stated you could give thirty days notice."

Some of my guilt came from a conversation with a retired priest in his mid-eighties, who was currently in his fifteenth interim. Since his official retirement, he and his spouse have traveled constantly throughout the Pacific Northwest, from one interim position to another. He began our conversation by asking for information about my ministry. When I replied that I had been officially retired more than four years and that this was my fifth interim and probably my last, a deep frown came over his face. Then he proudly shared his history of active ministry for the Lord since retirement.

This was not the first time in my retirement that an older retired priest had expressed displeasure with my post-retirement life. I recall two other times when clergy could not understand why I was not in some way serving a parish. They felt that I could, at least, be a pastoral assistant in a larger parish.

I began to defend myself to the fifteen-time interim priest, but thought better of it. Besides, we were getting ready to eat, and I'm never one to put off eating the delicious food of an Episcopal potluck supper. I wanted to tell him how accepting this interim work meant putting aside my advocacy for the mentally ill and their families. Our forty-two year old son has been mentally ill for twenty-six years. He lives two miles from us, and needs our compassion and ministry to his often-urgent needs. I wanted to tell him I had put aside my teaching of twelve-week classes for family members of the seriously mentally ill.

I wanted to share the fulfillment I had experienced as an advocate for the poor and defenseless in our county. I might have been so bold as to share my discovery of a greater sense of purpose than I had felt during most of my time as a parish priest. I wanted to tell him that my health problems meant I could not do more than one major area of service. That might have brought a reply in which he let me in on his own health problems and how he did not let them slow him down, so I held my tongue.

I thought about sharing my joy at having more time to spend with my wife, Ann, and to enjoy the traveling we had planned; of being close to our five precious grandchildren, watching them grow up, playing with them, giving and receiving love. He looked rather stern, though, and I feared he would be even more critical of my "lack of sacrifice for the Lord's work."

In every diocese I served as an 'active' parish priest, I knew retired priests who had continued in some way to serve in the Church. There were interim clergy like the one already mentioned, as well as priests who were permanent supply priests for small missions. A number of clergy remained connected to the parish as associates of a younger rector, or as pastoral assistants.

I must confess that when ordained in 1967, I pictured myself as a priest who would celebrate and preach until physically unable. I imagined people praising me for my dedicated service in the Church for as long as seventy years. I had no idea that, in retirement, I would seek other avenues of ministry out in God's world. I could not imagine some day enjoying ministries in which I did not wear my vestments, collar, or black shirt.

When we take our ordination vows, does it mean we must die at the altar or behind the pulpit? Is the experience of ministry and service of the Lord confined to the parish church setting? Is it acceptable for a retired priest to sit out in the congregation with his or her spouse after years of being 'up front'?

Ann used to tease me for not sitting still when we visited churches on our vacations. Often, my mind was preoccupied with what was happening back in the parish. Were those troublemakers scheming and plotting my demise? Before taking my latest interim position, Ann and I sat together on Sunday for two years in our post-retirement parish home. She no longer complained of my inability to enjoy the worship from this new perspective.

I believe we need to experience life from different perspectives, including without our black shirts and white collars. Retirement as one of those ordained for the service of God and his people does not have to be an "either/or" experience. Our Lord has different paths for each of us. All our Lord wants is our openness to serve him according to the purpose he has at the particular time. He promises our fulfillment and sense of purpose if we obey his calling to serve.

I've observed, through the years, 'retired' clergy willing to accept church work with nominal stipends, or as volunteers. We need to ask ourselves if this means that a younger priest, struggling financially, does not get a part-time position because a parish or mission cannot afford diocesan minimum stipends and benefits.

Should the time come when we are physically or mentally disabled, we can continue to serve. I have known priests who are a source of comfort and strength to their fellow retirement or nursing home residents. I know a priest confined to a wheelchair, who has a wonderful telephone ministry. He calls members of the parish on their birthdays and wedding anniversaries, saying a prayer for them.

Advanced age does not mean the end of our ministries, but alternative forms of serving God's people wherever we are. May we each be open to the adventure of our final years of serving our Lord according to his will, not ours.

Late on Friday night, three days after deciding to conclude my time as an interim, I received a phone call. A member of my last class for families of the mentally ill called from his beach cabin. He had found his twenty-year old bipolar son hanging from a rafter. He asked me to go to his home and tell his wife of the suicide. He could not think of anyone else he wanted to do this. It was extremely difficult, but I knew this was God calling me to this service.



Living in the Pacific Northwest to be near to three grown children and five grandchildren, the Rev. Don R. Greenwood and his wife, Ann, have, as their primary activity, their five grandchildren, all of whom live less than two hours away. After three sons and four grandsons, a girl, Annelise, was welcomed into the family last May. They fully intend to spoil her. Ann is a retired neurological nurse who enjoys gardening and reading fiction. Don is an aspiring fiction writer, working on a novel about a troubled Episcopal priest. Don recently accepted the call to be on the staff of a large parish as volunteer assisting priest.