



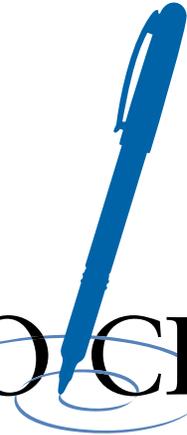
### About the Author

The Rev. Dr. Robert T. Copenhaver is the Chaplain to the Retired in the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia. Ordained in 1962, he served congregations throughout Virginia until his retirement in 1997. In his 60s, he learned to play the bagpipes. He and his wife, Mimi, live in Daleville, Virginia.

### About Vintage Voice

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# VINTAGE VOICE



## Blessings From Acts as Small as a Mustard Seed

By the Rev. Dr. Robert T. Copenhaver

Many of us who are retired clergy serve in a supply capacity or as interims in congregations throughout the United States, as well as in other parts of the Anglican Communion. Retired clergy are the glue that holds together many of our smaller missions and parishes. Of course we say our prayers for our congregations, but we might overlook the good that we can still do through small acts of facilitation and aid — small tasks, like small grains of mustard seed, which further the mission of Christian ministry. An example in my own life illustrates this, because, you see, it's all relational.

It all began a while back when a member of R.E. Lee Memorial Church in Lexington, Virginia — let's call her MJ) brought Gabriel K. to see me. I was retired and serving in a supply capacity at that time. MJ is a member of our diocesan Companion for Mission Commission and it was in that capacity that she knew Gabriel. Gabriel was a refugee from the Sudan, one of the "lost boys" whose tragic story we've read about. We met at a coffee shop and discussed the baptism of his young son. I heard his story, and I suggested that he, together with his wife and child, go with MJ and me to meet with the Rev. Susan Bentley that afternoon. Mother Sue is rector of St. James in Roanoke, a small congregation, where diversity is valued and where members truly care about each other. She met with us and we had a welcoming conversation with her and a tour of the church.

The next Sunday, Gabriel was at their 10:00 Eucharist. It wasn't long before he brought his Sudanese friend, Nelson, and Nelson in turn brought his wife, Maria. They began attending St. James regularly.

Mother Sue began ministering to the Sudanese community in Roanoke. She had met the late Rev. Mark Nichols, a missionary from The Episcopal Church to Southern Sudan, years before when they were both in the ordination "pipeline," and he had planted a seed in her heart concerning the plight of Sudanese Christians. Gabriel and Nelson spread the word among the Sudanese in the Roanoke Valley, and soon Mother Sue was having prayer services for Sudanese whose families had died in the Sudan. The relationship grew. Last summer, I attended a dinner that the Roanoke's Sudanese community put on

for St. James' parishioners. There were about 40 St. James members and 15 Sudanese hosts and hostesses at that summer meal. Since then, St. James has raised funds for educational needs in the Sudan — money for scholarship and school supplies. When the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia celebrated the ministry of Mark Nichols at a Sunday service at St. James last year, a choir of Sudanese sang and the Sudanese members put on the coffee hour afterwards. On that same Sunday, Gabriel shared his life story, including his trek across the Sudan to escape the civil war, ending up in a refugee camp in Kenya. And on a recent Pentecost Sunday at St. James, when the scripture was read in several languages Nelson read in Arabic and Gabriel read in Dinka.

The seed sprouted and the plant has grown. On a remarkable Trinity Sunday, I — along with Mother Sue — was honored to join with 29 Sudanese Christians who met in the late afternoon at St. James for a self-led prayer and worship service. Eight to 10 of the group had been meeting in homes, but they were praying about a larger space to welcome all Sudanese Christians who might wish to come. Result: the Sudanese Christian Fellowship now meets every Sunday at 5:00 at St. James. It is a non-denominational gathering for worship, fellowship, and support, and allows folks to attend their own congregations on Sunday mornings. They already have a mission statement: A message based on the Bible; a ministry motivated by the love of God; a mission to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in his name without discrimination; to help Sudanese children grow in faith and do the will of God as children of God; to stand by Christian families in both joy and sorrow.

I continue to marvel at how — more than 50 years since my ordination — I am able to be a blessing to others and to myself through acts as small as mustard seeds.



19 East 34th Street  
New York, NY 10016  
[www.cpg.org](http://www.cpg.org)