



**About the Author**

The Rev. Douglas M. Carpenter currently serves as Chaplain to the Retired Clergy and Spouses in the Diocese of Alabama. He served as rector of parishes in Alabama and Virginia from 1960 until 2005. He and his wife, Ann Piper Carpenter, have six children and 13 grandchildren. His most recent book is *Camp McDowell, the Way the World Could Be*.

**About Vintage Voice**

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# VINTAGE VOICE



**Old Linchpins**

**By the Rev. Douglas M. Carpenter**

What I missed most in retirement was the constant contact with people. So, on a dreary day when I was unusually low on energy, I was delighted to open a handwritten letter that began, “Hi, you old linchpin.” It was from someone I hadn’t seen in decades, writing to let me know that a book I had written had not only awakened happy memories but had also stimulated him to be back in touch with a number of his old friends.

I knew that a linchpin is “a locking pin inserted through an axel to prevent a wheel from slipping off.” Since I was being defined as a linchpin, I wondered if there were other definitions. My dictionary revealed that it also “refers to one who holds together the elements of a complex.”

As I reflected on this designation, I began to adopt this word as the designation of my “calling” as I move further into my ninth decade and am no longer able to drive. Thinking of myself as an old linchpin gives me new energy. I can carry out this ministry on my telephone, through email, by welcoming visitors, and in my writing. Not being able to drive is not so much of a handicap.

Since retiring at 72, I have written five books, filled with references to the people and places that are vivid in my memory. I’ve written about seeing extraordinary things in ordinary events, about a parish where I served for 32 years, about my father — the Rt. Rev. Charles C.J. Carpenter — who was the Bishop of Alabama for over 30 years, about my contacts with the Episcopal camp and conference center in Alabama from the age of 12 until today, about the many stories I’ve told around camp fires to countless campers. My memories connect with the memories of the many people I write about and hardly a day passes that I don’t hear from someone with whom I am connected through story.

These books are written for a particular audience, for those whose memories connect with mine, and that is what has brought me my designation as an “old linchpin.” This calling goes far beyond the writing and response. All of us retired clergy and spouses have a vast

network of connections. There are many people eager for those connections to be activated and located in the story. It should be no surprise that “communion” is such an important word.

I believe our deepest and most troubling questions have to do with our doubt that we are of any lasting value. Being part of a positive story brings an answer to our question of value. Those of us who are old in years have the capacity to be linchpins, to bring together the elements of an enduring story and to tell it in a way that includes many people whom we can call by name. The story that I am able to tell is a part of the Jesus story that has progressed over the past decades through The Episcopal Church, especially in Alabama. It is a large and dynamic story with wondrous chapters. Realizing that we are an integral part of this big story helps us to understand Jesus’ message that each of us is of lasting value.

Retired clergy are storytellers, and as we remind people of their important place in the big story, we speak to that deep need to belong.

In our later years when we are not as mobile, we still have amazing means of communication, and helping each other see more clearly our place in the story and in our communion is what it’s all about.



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