



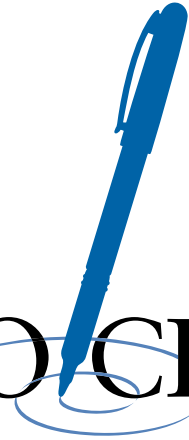
About the Author

Lee Powers is a retired priest of the Diocese of New Jersey. He has served congregations in New Jersey and Florida, and most recently served retired Bishop George Councell as his Canon to the Ordinary. He and Nancy have four children, nine grandchildren, and soon will have three great-granddaughters. They live near most of their family in southern New Jersey, and enjoy visits with extended family in California, Florida, New York, and Ohio.

About Vintage Voice

Vintage Voice is a monthly publication written by beneficiaries of The Church Pension Fund. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Articles are published with the authors' permission.

VINTAGE VOICE



What Do I Do Now?

By the Rev. Canon Lee Powers

The date was June 1, 1981, two weeks after graduation from the General Theological Seminary, and five days before I was to be ordained to the diaconate at Trinity Cathedral in Trenton, New Jersey.

It was my “first day on the job.” After a brief post-seminary family vacation and a move into the rectory of Trinity (“Old Swedes”) Church in Swedesboro, I began my official ministry as vicar of this mission church, sitting at the desk in my office on a Monday morning and thinking, “What do I do now?” I knew that Saturday’s ordination and Sunday’s worship were a few days away, and what I needed to do to prepare for those momentous events. But this was my first day as the pastor of this congregation, and most of my future ministry would be spent in days like this. So the question was real, and somehow, I knew it was of great importance. With no other good ideas in mind, I decided, “I’ll visit.”

A previous rector of 37 years’ ministry had retired four years earlier, so a visit with him seemed a great place to start. His wife answered the phone and I introduced myself as the church’s new vicar and asked if I could stop by for a visit. She said, “Why, of course.” Over tea and cookies that afternoon, I met a saintly man and his devoted wife and learned very much about the community and congregation I was called to serve. It was pure grace (or luck) that this simple visit began a healing process for this family who had experienced a difficult transition into retirement that affected their relationship with his first successor. Without knowing it, my own ministry was being shaped by this first encounter with a few earthly members of that glorious “cloud of witnesses.”

During my next 31 years of ministry serving parishes and our diocese, I have always come to appreciate the wisdom and generous spirit of “those who have gone before.” This has enabled me to hear words of comparison by members who either want to exalt or humble me, or some previous rector they expect me to emulate. I always give thanks for the ministries of those who have come before me, and within my first six months of service, I say something like this: “*I know that some of you are unhappy with some changes I am asking you to*

make. Please know that I am making no judgment on the way things were done before. We all serve with love and devotion, and utilize the tools, teachings and experiences of our ministry to help our congregations grow in Christ. If I ask you to do something different, I am not declaring it as 'better' or 'worse' than how the Rev. Bumpkiss did things. He offered you his best, and I hope to do the same. I'll welcome your feedback after a period of trying things a new way."

When I shared this in a private meeting with a member who was very angry about trying Rite Two and having lay persons administer the chalice, he said, *"You can count on getting my feedback!"* Six months later, he shared with me some helpful, constructive comments on his own experience of the changes. He continued to offer himself in many forms of ministry for the next 11 years.

"What do I do now?" Thirty years after saying those words for the first time, I found myself repeating them again as I pondered telling my beloved bishop that I was ready to retire. I had gone through a period of discernment that included some frank interaction with our Lord, and had concluded that it was time. I was growing weary of my present ministry, and wanted an opportunity to be free of the demands of a Ministry Position Description. I was 62+ years old and wanted to "give back" to others in thanksgiving for all the blessings I had received in my life in Christ. I have good health and lots of energy. How could I put those to use in a way that would help the next generation of church leaders assume their roles of ministry and leadership?

For me, this "give back" stage has included certain priorities. I want to worship with my wife Nancy in a congregation where we are both being fed and have an opportunity to offer our gifts. This has shaped our journey in finding the right congregation where we can be welcomed and utilized as we support the leadership of the parish. I am continuing my ministry as a faculty member of CREDO, a wellness program of the Church Pension Group. And I have utilized my experience in teaching and leadership in areas of adult Christian education, stewardship, and organizing a special training event for the parishes of our convocation (deanery). I am becoming particularly interested in the catechumenal process, and am hoping to assist our new diocesan bishop, Chip Stokes, and his staff in determining if and how to introduce this process in our diocese as a first step in our primary missions of evangelism and Christian formation.

Wrapped around all this, and placing appropriate limits on my times of commitment, is the time I now have to devote to the special ministry of being an at-home husband and a much more present father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Our four kids and two granddaughters are breeding like rabbits. That should keep me from spending too much time wondering, "What do I do now?"



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