

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Horizons Ahead

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“Bruce, have you ever considered retirement?” The question was articulated by my People’s Warden in a friendly way — I think — as we ambled along together. Several years earlier, I had admonished my Rector’s Warden, a Marine general, to alert me if “the troops were uneasy” or if I began exhibiting symptoms of mental or neurological distress. No report — so I sailed past my 65th, 66th, 67th, 68th, and 69th birthdays. Now, as I approached my 70th birthday, I realized that I had spent exactly half of my life as rector of this parish — and it was my time to go.

We had accomplished a lot. The churches in town had worked together to banish segregated housing and schooling, to provide fair and affordable housing for low income and senior citizens, to initiate Samaritan Hospice, CONTACT, a Burlington County emergency hotline, and Interfaith Caregivers ministry. Recently, Moorestown, New Jersey was named one of the finest communities in which to live — and it is largely due to its citizens working together for the greater benefit of all.

“Don’t retire *from* until you have something to retire *to*.” Good advice. I had known some men who retired to play golf every day; that didn’t last long; others who retired to the casinos — disastrous. I have lived through the reigns of three bishops (*mirabile dictu*) and I still loved the pastoral ministry. So I took some interim positions in diverse neighboring parishes.

Then, after forty years in one diocese, with two of our children living in Virginia, we decided to relocate. It was one of the best decisions we ever made! Welcomed and licensed by Bishop Lee, I substituted for ill or vacationing clergy in about a dozen country parishes. I felt needed, but it wasn’t enough. I attended the regional clericus: the clergy were young and had their own agenda. I joined an interdenominational clergy group: it died peacefully when the convener left town. I felt a vacuum in my spiritual life.

Well, taking Sunday services took care of the first day. What about the following six? Moving to Charlottesville, VA, in 1999, just in time for the national census, provided me with a way to learn about my new community. After census-taker training, I traversed a good cross-section of the city, sometimes with police protection in drug-infested areas. I was surprised by the number of people who, for various reasons, did not want to be interviewed.

Then, despite not having had a very positive experience with the Red Cross during the Second World War (when I was in the Marine Corps), I enlisted in about ten training courses offered by the local Red Cross chapter. Having helped establish a hospice in New Jersey, I enlisted in a training program for volunteers in the local facility. I wanted only to be a caring presence for a terminally ill patient and his/her family. That never worked out — a shake-up in the organization confused the records and us candidates.

So I volunteered to be interviewed by students in the local high school on the subjects of “Growing up in the Great Depression,” “The Civil Rights Movement” or “The Second World War.” I was interested that these students always elected to hear about the first topic. This led to my volunteering to be a male presence every Friday in an “At Risk” class of students in the high school. I learned a lot from the very gifted and utterly committed teacher. On the last day of the semester, that experience culminated with her arriving with a severe case of laryngitis and, in a written note to me, said, “You’re on for the day!”

While undergoing chemotherapy for colon cancer and metastatic lung cancer, I was introduced to an extraordinary oncologist. He wore a cowboy shirt, boots and jeans, and his nurses called him by his first name. The hospital in which I took my therapy was the same one in which two of my granddaughters had been born 20 years earlier, so I felt right at home. What camaraderie I joined! Of course, we knew why we were there. The good doctor was intelligent enough not to try to predict our life spans; we know what is coming.

As the hospital became my second home, I volunteered to be a patient advocate, a role in which, as a parish priest, I had often found myself. Again, training was required. I could have taught the course, but it was good discipline to keep my mouth shut and my heart open. This went on until my neuropathic legs could no longer sustain the long corridors between visits.

One day, I read an interview in a local news magazine in which a candidate for Congress, who opposed the War in Iraq, named his least favorite politician. “That’s my man,” I said. I called together the eight clergy in my neighborhood (six Presbyterians, two Episcopalians, and one Unitarian — that’s either pre-destined or manifest destiny). We met with our man for two hours. Result: we became his devoted followers. Unfortunately, he lost the election, but Clergy and Laity United for Justice and Peace was born! *Deo Gratias*.

For four years, we have met monthly in the Rotarian mode — lunch and program in an hour-and-a-half. We have heard speakers and sponsored forums on issues which we believe have moral implications — the war (of course); lack of health care; the disparity between the rich and the poor; the environment; and fair mortgage rates for all people regardless of race, color or creed. We have grown in numbers, and some members are quite distinguished! It has been a challenging and rewarding experience. We may not change the world — or even our community — but we believe in what we are doing and that it must be done by someone — so why not by us?



After serving parishes in Pennsylvania and Kentucky, Bruce was rector of Trinity Church in Moorestown, NJ, for 35 years. He is the son, the grandson, the nephew, the grand-nephew, the brother, the father and the father-in-law of Episcopal clergy. He and his wife, Margaret, are the parents of five grown children and grandparents of nine. Their oldest son, John, is rector of St. Mark’s Church in Alexandria, VA; John is also a Colonel in the Army Chaplain Corps and has served tours in both Kosovo and Iraq.