



About the Author

The Rev. Glenn Busch retired as rector emeritus of St. Mary's Episcopal Church in High Point, North Carolina, in 2008. Previously he served parishes in Bedford, Virginia, and Richmond, Virginia, and was an adjunct faculty member in religion and philosophy at High Point University. He and his wife, Kathleen, reside in Lynchburg, Virginia. They have two children and two grandchildren. He blogs at glennbusch.com and can be reached by email at glenn.busch@gmail.com.

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

To Stay or Not to Stay? That is the Question

By the Rev. Glenn Busch

Early on in my ministry, I was advised that when the time comes for a rector to leave a parish, he should go away and stay away, so as not to compromise the ministry of his successor. (Back then, it was always “he.”)

Much has changed since my ordination to the priesthood in 1971, and such advice is no longer incontestable. After all, it seems almost cruel to require the severing of valued relationships that have deepened over the years, especially for clergy who have served in one place for a long time. And in my case it was a very long time: more than 27 years.

No doubt examples come to mind of situations where the presence and participation of a retired former rector seems to work just fine. But stories of conflict and divisive interference abound, as well.

The personalities of those involved surely play a leading role. But the dynamics are complicated, and situations differ. So I offer no judgement on the decisions that others have made; merely some reflections on the one that I eventually made.

My wife and I were well settled in the parish and our community. We raised our children there, loved our home, participated in civic affairs, and developed friendships that enriched our lives. But Kathy had recently retired from her position at the university, and the time had come for me to ponder what I should do.

To prepare, I went to CREDO, gathered information, read books, talked to The Church Pension Fund, and sought the advice of other clergy. All proved helpful. Most notably, I became aware of a study done by The Alban Institute that noted the difficulties experienced by clergy who follow a “long-term pastor” — someone who had been in place for more than 20 years. The statistics reflecting disenchantment and early departure were alarmingly high; and while that piece of information alone was not the deciding factor, it contributed mightily to our retirement planning.

The decision as to when to retire was far less complicated. The parish had prospered. We had recently purchased a large tract of land adjacent to the campus, and architectural drawings were submitted for a community life center and a new education/administration building, in addition to impending renovations of the youth facility. The parish was about to embark on a large and lengthy construction project that would be years in completing.

We had arrived at a major transition point: a fitting opportunity, it seemed to me, for the parish to be led into its promising future by someone new — a younger someone who possessed the kind of energy that for me was beginning to sag.

Ordained a priest at the age of 25, I'd had a long and fulfilling ministry, been the beloved rector of a parish that honored me as I did them. A new rector deserved the same opportunity, free of the former rector's lingering presence.

The original plan was for me to retire in the fall of 2007. But when it became apparent that the initial fundraising for the building project would not be complete by then, the date was extended to the spring of the following year.

On our last annual retreat together, the vestry and I developed a formal statement about my post-retirement involvement in the life of the parish. While it did not exclude future visits, it clearly stated that once retired as rector, I would not be available for baptisms, weddings, or funerals. A stated policy was intended to obviate requests before they might occur. Even so, requests did come, some as recent as last year, the eighth year of my retirement. Having the policy in place has made it much easier for me to decline those requests without hurting the feelings of people I still care about, or trespassing on the pastoral ministry of the new rector.

On a bright April morning in 2008, I conducted my last service as rector of the parish, after which Kathy and I said our final goodbyes as the sadness of leaving mingled with the excitement of embracing a new life in a different city in another state. A new beginning for us and the parish had just begun.

Leaving is never easy, nor is starting over. The pre-retirement literature I had read indicated that those moving to a new city should expect about a two-year period of adjustment. At the time, such advice seemed a bit excessive; but now that we've made the transition, I'd say it's just about right.

When you have lived in one place for a long time, routines and the people who accompany them are too easily taken for granted. As a new resident, it takes time to find a favorite grocery store, a new church, a barber who knows how you like your hair, restaurants of choice, an auto mechanic you can trust, entertainment venues and, particularly, new doctors, which is more difficult if you are over 65, as more doctors limit or refuse to accept Medicare patients.

Now that we have successfully navigated the resettlement process, Kathy and I are happy in our new surroundings. For us, it has been the opening of a new chapter in our lives, an opportunity to pursue interests for which we previously didn't have the time.

I continue to look back with fond memories on the part I played in the history and development of the parish; and it gives me much joy to see it flourishing under the leadership of the new rector. There are times when I wish that I were still part of the action: engaged, making decisions, rendering my opinion ... which is why I know that we made the correct decision, when we decided not to stay.



19 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016
www.cpg.org