

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Of Pensions and Pastors

The Rev. Canon John C. Powers

In our culture, almost everyone — it seems — complains. In the workplace they complain about the boss. At home they complain about the wife, the husband, the noisy kids. In the army or the university dormitory, everyone complains about the food. Residents of the Episcopal retirement center in my diocese carry on that tradition, and frequently food is a hot topic (or should I say a “not-so-hot” topic?) in their periodic so-called “town meetings.”

Clergy are like the rest of society. Clergy complain about their bishops, or the state of the church, or how plodding and inept are search committees. But there are few complaints about the Church Pension Fund. Wherever you go, you hear about how efficient and caring the Pension Fund is.

Retired clergy — who may be the most obvious beneficiaries of the Pension Fund — also are its most conspicuous fans. However, there is more to their admiration than those checks that go out every month to retired clergy, surviving spouses, and dependent children of deceased clergy.

Consider the program created by the Church Pension Fund to encourage dioceses to establish chaplaincies to retired clergy, spouses, and surviving spouses. Not every diocese has such a program, but where chaplaincies exist, the diocesan bishop appoints a retired cleric (and frequently his/her spouse) as chaplain(s) to the retired in the diocese.

Programs vary from diocese to diocese. Some send cards on birthdays and anniversaries. Some send newsletters to the retired with reports of illnesses, deaths, family goings-on, travels, and other activities. Others host overnight events, frequently at diocesan conference centers, where fresh medical and financial information from the Pension Fund is made available. Fun, fellowship, and happy hours also occur.

I serve as Bishop's Chaplain to the Retired Clergy in the Diocese of Oklahoma. Our chaplaincy program began in 1995 and has flourished ever since under the leadership of a number of chaplains.

I was appointed when a long-serving chaplain couple decided it was time to hand over the reins to someone else. I had just retired from full-time work as a priest, and was looking for an opportunity to do something different and interesting on a very part-time basis. Also, my wife, Betsy, and I saw it very much as something we could do together.

Within a couple of years of assuming our duties as a chaplaincy couple, Betsy became ill with cancer and died in February of 2003. Looking back, I realize that my chaplaincy work — which has extended nearly seven years beyond her death — helped me to heal after her loss. Additionally, this ministry has become so much more to me than an interesting, part-time distraction; it has become one of the most significant ministries of my long career, greatly enriching my life in the service of my fellow retired clergy and their families.

Much happens when retired clergy become co-chaplains with and for each other. Here in the Diocese of Oklahoma, retired clergy raised funds to assist a clergy spouse who had lost her job and was facing a financial crisis. Another priest came to the aid of a clergy spouse who had become frail and blind, assuming the duties of legal guardian in the years leading up to her death. All the final arrangements following her death, including funeral, burial, and disposition of her property, were handled competently, caringly, and legally.

In support of this ministry, all the diocesan chaplains to the retired gather annually in provincial associations under the aegis of the Church Pension Fund to increase their effectiveness, learn about medical insurance changes, and hear the President of the Fund give updates on the Fund itself.

Periodically, chaplains to the retired attend a national meeting as guests of the Pension Fund for several days. The next one will be held in Scottsdale, Arizona, on April 18–20, 2010. Here, again, there is the mutual sharing of what goes on in other dioceses, and opportunities for continuing education for chaplains. Staff from the Pension Fund provide information on our medical insurance and on new or expanded benefits to our insurance packages for the retired. We now have the Travel Protection Benefit, which reimburses medical expenses that occur when retired clergy travel outside of the U.S., and even includes medical evacuation when needed. There is assistance for eye examinations, eyeglass purchases, and hearing aid purchases. And dental care. There is an Employee Assistance Program, available twenty-four hours a day to locate counseling services for help with stress management, grief and loss, and even researching nursing home care. There is also the Health Advocate program, which helps retired clergy families navigate the health care system.

If your diocese does not have a program for retired clergy, spouses, and surviving spouses, and you would like to help establish one in your diocese, consult with your bishop. The Church Pension Fund also offers resources which can support the establishment of a diocesan ministry to the retired clergy, spouses, and survivors.



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