

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## New Tricks for Old Dogs

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A major consequence of retirement for most clergy is the disruption of normal systems of stimulation, nurture and support. Withdrawal from the life of one's last parish may be necessary or prudent, but it can also be painful and disorienting. The realignment of established relationships with clergy peers and valued co-workers can be disquieting too. A change of residence, which often takes place at retirement, further intensifies a sense of dislocation. When the normal anxieties of aging and related health concerns are added to the mix, retirement becomes a time of considerable stress.

Twelve years ago, a group of clergy in the Washington, D.C. area began to meet to address the personal, vocational, and theological issues that go along with aging. Some of us were permanently retired from church employment; others of us occasionally took on temporary or part-time ecclesial positions. But all of us knew we were at a major change-point in our lives and wanted to deal with it.

When we started to meet, we ranged in age from the early sixties to the mid-seventies. Now we have added a dozen years to those numbers. All of us are male and all are married. Gender exclusivity was more by accident than design at the outset, but in practice we have found that deepening the bonds of friendship with other men is very important to us. Membership in the group is by invitation only, largely because our style is distinctive and not suited to everyone's comfort level. We think that seven is about the right size for a group of this kind. Over the years we have lost one member by death and another through diminished interest. Replacement members have been added. We call ourselves "The Old Dogs" and to our delight we have discovered that it is indeed possible for us to learn new tricks.

Discussions early on established the following norms for the group. They have worked well over time.

- Give a high priority to regular attendance.
- Maintain confidentiality and respect for each member's privacy.
- Provide a climate where personal risk-taking is possible but not demanded.
- Work at truly listening to one another.
- Honor and respect each member's offering.
- Stay with a topic until it is dealt with.
- Check the quality of group process from time to time.
- Enable graceful entrance into the group and exit from it.

We meet twice a month for more than two hours at a convenient retirement facility that has generously extended us hospitality, although none of us actually live there. One of us drives sixty miles round trip to be with the group; another travels twenty miles. We gather around a breakfast

table and exchange news and gossip and discuss movies seen, books read and the hot political or cultural topic of the moment. Later we move to another room to address more personal topics. Leadership is shared. Issues are raised as they become important to members of the group. Silence is rare. As the years have passed, our conversations have been punctuated with contending declarations of theological conviction, laughter over life's absurdities, tears of anguish at times of loss, tenacious political disputation, and moments of tender compassion. We have listened sensitively to each other and have learned a lot in the process. Our sessions are not therapeutic in any formal or structured sense, but because we have been together for many years, we have developed a climate of trust that enables us to speak with intimacy, candor, affection, and respect.

We have traversed some difficult territory these past twelve years. With a total of 335 years of pastoral ministry behind us, we find we have a huge reservoir of life-enhancing wisdom and experience to share with one another. We have seen one member through a painful divorce, and have rejoiced with him as time and circumstance led him into a new and life-giving marriage. The illness and death of a founding member deepened our relationship with him and each other and helped us to face into our own mortality. We grieved his death as we would a member of our own family. The honesty, courage and openness of one of our number about his growing cognitive impairment has taught us much about ways of dealing with an affliction that frightens us all, the longer we live.

As our professional connections with the Church continue to change, we spend a considerable amount of time exploring new ways of relating to the institution we love and revere (though not uncritically), and new approaches to nurturing our spiritual growth and living out our personal faith. Some of us are delighted to be free of old ministries; some have found new and different ministries and are equally delighted. One of us, for example, has discovered that singing in a parish choir is the most life-giving way for him to stay connected with the Church at this point in his life. Liberation from previous roles and stereotypes has enabled each of us to open new doors, theologically and spiritually. These doorways have not led us all into the same room. But as we share with one another what we discover in our new-found space, we find that all of us are challenged and enriched.

A dozen years of shared experience have taught us that no one needs to be adrift alone in the ebbing tide of old age. With the help and support of caring companions, all can learn to ride end of life currents in new and rewarding ways. The vessel that we have fashioned for ourselves would not be right for everyone, of course. We imagine that other readers of these pages have found congenial colleagues and developed useful disciplines to help them negotiate the choppy waves of aging. We would love to hear their stories, perhaps in future issues of *The Vintage Voice*. And we hope that those who still find themselves at sea alone will take the initiative to seek others with whom to share their voyage into the future.



A. Theodore Eastman retired as Bishop of Maryland in 1994. Subsequently, he helped establish the College for Bishops and served in interim capacities as provost and, more recently, as vicar of the Washington National Cathedral. He and his wife, Sarah, have been brave enough to travel frequently and adventurously with three other retired bishops and their spouses.