



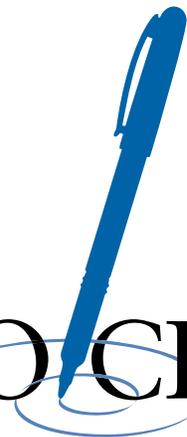
About the Author

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About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



A Funny Thing Happened to Me on the Way to Retirement

By the Rt. Rev. Rayford B. High, Jr.

After almost 45 years in the ordained ministry, I made the difficult decision to resign as Bishop Suffragan of Texas where I had served the East Region of the Diocese of Texas for nine years. My wife Pat and I decided to move to the Fort Worth area where our three children and six grandchildren live. I could even do some supply work!

Once my decision was official, things began to unravel. First, we couldn't find a house we really liked, so we decided to build a new home. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought we would build a new home in retirement! While our new home was being built, we lived at our family river house, south of Houston near the Texas Gulf Coast — not a bad deal for an old fisherman!

Then another unexpected thing happened: I was invited to meet with the Standing Committee of the Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth to consider being the third Provisional Bishop (following Bishops Ted Gulick and Wallis Ohl). After prayerful consideration, I accepted the call and began in mid-November of 2012. As someone who has been in the ministry for 45 years as deacon, priest, canon, and bishop, I felt I had some gifts to offer the diocese. It was moving from a state of transition after being reorganized in 2008, yet still living under the cloud of uncertainty brought about by the ongoing litigation between the diocese and the former bishop and people who left The Episcopal Church.

Intertwined with these realities were the stories I heard from laity and clergy alike of their deeply felt pain over the loss of sister and brother Episcopalians who had left the church, joined another denomination, or simply quit going to church. Both sides of the litigation — The Episcopal Church and those who departed the church — have suffered greatly from loss of members, loss of their church homes, and the distraction of litigation.

In spite of these seemingly unsurmountable hurdles, I have seen and experienced great hope, enthusiasm, and a desire to move forward with God's mission in the Diocese of Fort Worth.

Let me share some things that are happening here:

1. Several of our displaced congregations have, within this year, prayerfully decided to move to a different location that is more visible in the community in order to grow and better serve their communities through outreach ministries. They said to me very simply, “Bishop, we are not going to wait on the courts to decide our future. We feel led by the Holy Spirit to move forward to do God’s work of evangelism and reaching out to those in need right now!”
2. Our congregations are focusing on what God is calling them to do rather than wallowing in the past or what-if’s.
3. I have seen and experienced the radical hospitality practiced in our diocese that is so refreshing and it reminds me of what the early church must have been like. We welcome all of God’s children!
4. Laity are discovering new and deeper ways to offer their gifts for ministry, something that was not encouraged here in the past. And as our lay leaders discover the joy of serving Christ in and through the church, they are encouraging others to step forward.
5. Each year as we grow in Christ, we remember how our larger Church reached out to us during the early weeks and months after the very painful split. Not only were we showered with prayers and encouragement, we also received all sorts of things needed to have a “portable church on wheels.” We know we are a member of a loving and caring church beyond our diocese and we are so very grateful to all of you. Other denominations stepped forward to support us and offer space and assistance, as well; some of our congregations are worshiping in Seventh Day Adventist, Disciple of Christ, and non-denominational wedding chapel locations. Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University has supported us from the day of our reorganization.
6. Finally, my faith has been deepened and strengthened through this new ministry to which I have been called. I have seen and experienced how God has moved folks from pain, despair, and uncertainty to finding ways of living out our Christian faith that require creativity and innovation we did not know possible. In an initial meeting with the Episcopal Church Building Fund (we had several congregations participating in the recasting assets process), I innocently stated “nothing is off the table” as you think about your future. The lay leaders took me literally! Each participating congregation has made significant moves forward in growth and outreach.

As the sixth Bishop of Fort Worth, I can say I have been blessed by God as I have offered what I have for true work of Christ’s Kingdom. Through this ministry, not only has my faith been deepened and strengthened through the Holy Spirit, but I have grown in my appreciation and gratitude for the laity and clergy (especially our retired clergy) as they labor in the vineyard of the Lord under unusual conditions.

God’s spirit has helped me grow in what I believe the church can do in the 21st century, and has enabled me to be more accepting of all of God’s people.

My biggest challenge is to balance the desire of a bishop to capitalize on all the challenges and opportunities I see in the diocese, with family, hobbies, and relaxation. Everyone who reads this knows what I am talking about. But if all else fails, at the end of the day I can still say, “You know, I AM retired!”



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