



About the Author

Ken Kesselus served mostly small congregations throughout his 31 years of active ministry. He served as a deputy to four General Conventions and on the national church's Executive Council from 2000 to 2006. He was honored as Texas Rural Minister of the Year and Distinguished Alumnus of Seminary of the Southwest. He has written several histories and three biographies, including John Hines: Granite on Fire. After returning to his hometown, Bastrop, Texas, he served on the city council for eight years, including three as mayor. After his second retirement, he plans to join his wife, Toni, traveling and spending time with grandchildren, and to do whatever he can to help people in any way possible. KKesselus@yahoo.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. If you have a reflection about your life in retirement, consider writing for the Vintage Voice! Send your submissions to vintagevoice@cpg.org.

VINTAGE VOICE



The Employee Support Guy

A Story of My Second Career, and Second Retirement

By The Rev. Ken Kesselus

At age 56, after 31 years of active parish ministry, I retired because I was burned out and somewhat frustrated by administrative priorities as rector of a large parish. I returned to the small town where I grew up and had served for 18 years at the small church there. Needing supplemental income, I found a half-time job working at an electric utility, but after six months I moved to full-time status in a position that turned into a second career, one that recently ended, shortly after my 70th birthday.

This unique job allowed me to carry out work similar to what first attracted me to the priesthood — pastoral care. My boss named me “ombudsman,” but I called myself “the employee support guy” because my job simply was to do anything possible to help our 300 employees and their families. That’s a mark of the uniqueness and brilliance of this CEO who put first priority on the welfare of his employees and, significantly, created a set of foundational values that included “Love.”

One day, the general manager wandered into a meeting of operations’ superintendents to greet everyone. Spotting me, he asked, “What are you doing here?” I replied, as I often did, “Looking for opportunities to be of service to our employees.” Playfully, he accused me of trying to score points with him, but that’s honestly what I did for 14 years.

He hired me because he had observed my relational skills, which had been exercised over decades of helping people through various trials and difficulties that confront all of us. He cared so much for the employees that he wanted to make sure someone on his staff was readily available for whatever they might need. He told me that as a self-starter and self-manager I would figure out the best ways to use my particular skills and experience to benefit the company.

He empowered me to look out for all employees, independent from the normal confines of an organizational structure. I reported directly to him. I had no budget, no employees to supervise, no specific responsibility in any operational task. I didn’t wear my “preacher hat,” unless requested to do so, but some thought of me as their chaplain. In fact, I tried to follow the model of an army chaplain whom I knew at seminary.

The first call on my time at the company involved helping individual employees with anything that concerned them. I offered confidentiality and constantly reminded employees of our policy of empowering them to speak up and consult others without fear of reprisal. I didn't impose myself on anyone, but simply remained alert to requests for service. There was nothing I wouldn't attempt and no question or request I would not consider. I loved my career at Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, as I loved helping my fellow employees as much as helping parishioners in ordained ministry.

My services took many forms. Dramatic examples came from our role in recovery from the worst forest fire in the state's history, and the electrocution of a lineman. But most of my actions were more "parish-like," such as visiting employees in hospitals, or discussing personal problems (marital issues or difficulties with children or neighbors or providing comfort for the bereaved). I also mediated conflicts among colleagues on a team, gave advice about dealing with supervisors and fellow employees, discussed the best ways to plan for difficult meetings with a boss, walked older employees through the retirement process, helped employees negotiate the path to seek relief from workplace frustrations, provided direction to the right person or means of addressing issues, helped obtain information about the reasons for actions that an employee could not understand or thought unfair, and even coached new supervisors in the difficult art of leadership. Sometimes, I was simply a sounding board for those needing to vent or test ideas, or who wanted assistance in making sense out of a puzzling assignment.

I attended a lot of meetings and training sessions in order to gain a better idea of what the workforce was up against and simply to be around employees. When meetings included managers and superintendents, I often offered thoughts from my unique, objective perspective — of one who didn't have "a dog in the hunt" and because I consistently thought through the lens of non-supervisory personnel. I also tried to do the same thing as a member of a number of groups that met regularly.

Often, I functioned as the "gray hair" in the room, the one with a lot of experience and long-range perspectives on life. I helped the general manager develop the company's foundation values that included "Respect," "Community," and "Courage." I wrote and spoke about their meaning and application to practical situations and worked hard to encourage employees to fully live into these values.

Above all, I did what I told my boss that day — looked for and responded to opportunities to serve employees. I constantly reminded them that my job depended on their calling me for assistance. I asked again and again, "What can I do for you?" and stated, "I am here for you."

A few weeks ago, I retired, finally, but if I were looking for a third career, I would consider going on the road to tell my current story to CEOs and boards of directors to encourage them to establish similar positions and take advantage of retired clergy to fill the bill.

