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Retirement – Rust or Gold?

The Rev. Canon Laurence D. Fish

What a pleasant-sounding word *retirement* is when uttered at the beginning of one's ministry. At that time, I thought of retirement as something rather like hitting the mother lode of gold after a lifetime of pick-and-shovel mining. Oddly, the closer retirement loomed, the more I began to associate retirement with the growing collection of aches, pains, and bodily-organ misfires that made themselves known. Yet I was certain that it would be "adios" by the age of sixty-five. When I reached that plateau, it became apparent that the saying, "That isn't gold in the retirement years, it's rust!" had some truth to it, so I continued to pastor until age seventy-two when I formally retired.

Although I have plenty to do and more, informal gatherings with other retired clergy made it clear that not all had found that meaningful "something extra" to do after a long ordained ministry. For some clergy, being on stage all the time, though we groan about it among ourselves, is seductive, and when the curtain falls, there is a part of us that is lost and empty for a time. The best cure for that is to take a part in another play. Yes, father/mother, there is another play.

When you look around at your fellow retired clergy, what do you see? For myself, what came to me most strongly was that here was a group of men and women with encyclopedic experience in our diocese that was retiring with them! That amounts to losing an important and irreplaceable part of our history. Now we have a chance not only to act in the play, but also to create and write the history on which the play is based, dependent upon the cumulative knowledge and historic view that is uniquely ours. I would like to suggest some ways that retired clergy could become involved in saving that history for the future of their diocese.

Every diocesan archivist/historiographer/registrars has at least one box of photos in the closet with no names, places, or events on the back to identify them. A few years ago, we gathered a fairly large group of retired clergy around a big table and gave each cleric a pile of unidentified photos. The retired clergy ranged from recently retired to those retired over twenty years or more. I provided a stack of past diocesan journals, clerical directories, and group clergy photos to aid in identification. In no time at all, names and places were being dredged up out of the past to the accompaniment of much laughter and "Do you remember when's." Long-forgotten persons and incidences bubbled to the surface, which, of course, led to more sharing. One reminiscence triggered another and, though this slowed the pace of the project more than a little, it was well worth it. Almost everyone had an anecdote or story to share about one particular bishop who, one way or another, influenced all of us. The Rt. Rev. Albert L. Banyard, VII Bishop of New Jersey, was a unique person and, as so often happens to unique persons, a source of innocent merriment. So manifold are his works that the suggestion was made that before permanent retirement took us from this mortal coil, we ought to all write down our memories of Bishop Banyard and make them part of the archives! (That is in progress.) One of us would draw a blank about someone's picture but someone else would know exactly who it was and then, of course, we would chat

about our newly-remembered brother or sister. The end result was that all felt invigorated in some strange way. We had once again enlarged the circle to take back in long-forgotten clergy; we warmed to their memory and smiles wreathed our faces. Oh yes, several more gatherings were necessary to complete the task!

Since most diocesan archives are understaffed — if staffed at all — a few hours a week spent helping the archivist in sorting, filing, boxing, shredding, and shelving would be of enormous help. Some archives consist of a pile of boxes in the cellar that have been there a hundred years, and no one has the slightest idea of their contents. At the very least, sorting and putting the material in archival boxes for better storage would be of help to a future archivist. If there is an archivist, full or part time, the helping hand of someone knowledgeable about the Church could help immensely. Some dioceses have two or more such retired clergy who are of vital assistance to the archivist. It is such important work and so few are called to help.

The retired cleric who is addicted to flea markets can be a source of many lost treasures of the diocese. In my own jaunts through flea markets over the years, I have found a large oil portrait of a bishop, photo albums containing pictures of a diocesan church and choirs from about 1930, plans for the high altar of one of our 300-year-old churches, old postcards that show what a church looked like a hundred years ago, journals and sermons of early bishops, and a host of other historical memorabilia including commemorative plates, silverware, and pottery. All these were added to the diocesan archives at a fraction of the cost shops that sell such material would charge. By the way, some of these items, especially postcards, can be found on Internet sites, particularly eBay.

As you become familiar with the archive holdings, you can be of assistance in the deluge of requests archivists get for genealogical information. You can help trace baptisms, marriages, and burials for those who need the information.

Finally, if you are a competent writer, there are parishes that need help researching and writing their history. If you have the time and the interest, letting the parishes know that you are willing to assist in writing a congregational history will find more than a few interested. You might be caught by some information in the archives that prompts you to research and write about it, making available to others what had remained hidden. Archives are packed with subjects crying out to be researched and printed. Thumbnail sketches of all past bishops will always be rewarding as will the history of your cathedral. A ministry to those of other languages, a mission experiment that was unusual and fruitful, and the history of the convocations or deaneries will find eager readers. In my archive are dozens of unusual stories waiting to be found, developed, and printed.

These are just a few of the ways that I feel retired clergy can serve the diocese and themselves and be of value to a Church they have ministered to for so long.



The Rev. Canon Laurence D. Fish lives in Trenton, New Jersey where he continues to serve as historian and archivist for the Diocese of New Jersey. His hobbies include collecting primitive furniture and pottery. His four children and twelve grandchildren help keep the rust out of the golden years. He is author of *Writing a Congregational History*, published by the National Episcopal Historians and Archivists.