

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ October 2005

Vocation to Retirement?

The Rt. Rev. David B. Reed

One of the great joys of my ministry as a bishop over thirty years — first in Colombia and then in Kentucky — was to meet with men and women who truly believed that God had called them to an ordained ministry in the Church. There was a spark in their eyes, an earnestness in the way they spoke, and a willingness to make real sacrifices to follow this calling. As we all know, not everyone who feels called ends up getting ordained, but they all start with that same vision and commitment. I do not think that anyone ordained in this Church was looking for a job or applying for a position when beginning the ordination process. Somehow it is different when it seems that God is calling. Why is it that some retired clergy, tired of the work and ready to let someone else carry on a ministry, seem to have forgotten what a vocation is, as opposed to a career?

Today, in my own retirement, I serve as the Bishop's Chaplain to the Retired Clergy and Surviving Spouses of our diocese and I minister to some of these same people, as well as to people who were ordained by my predecessor or in other dioceses. I frequently wonder what happened to that earnestness, spark in the eye, willingness to do anything "because God is calling me." What happened to that sense of vocation?

It is obvious that those who have "borne the burden and heat of the day" are entitled to a graceful relief from the burdens of parish ministry, chaplaincy, or whatever path they followed during their professional careers and before they received their first pension checks. In our society, one does not have to work forever, and we can all be grateful that the Church and the Church Pension Fund have provided so well for us. But is this our vocation — retirement?

There are three dimensions to the vocation to ordained ministry that do not change when the first pension check arrives. The first is the maintenance of a spiritual life that nourishes and feeds us as members of the Body of Christ. If this was important when we were in active ministry, it is no less important now. The Church provides rich resources to feed the soul, so that we may continue to be people of God. The most effective of these is a regular prayer life. Personally, I have found the daily use of Morning Prayer tremendously fulfilling. I tried to keep the Daily Office during my working years, but seldom managed to say the Office more than three times a week. I simply was too busy, too scheduled. That was no excuse, but the fact is that I didn't do it. Now, there is no reason I can not do it quite regularly, and I am fortunate to have a parish church nearby where I can pray the Office most mornings with others. Not everyone needs to say Morning Prayer, but if you do not have some regular program of spiritual discipline, you are not feeding your vocation from God. Retired couples often do this at the breakfast table every day.

The call to serve God *in the Church* does not end with a retirement check either. How many times have we preached, "You can't be a Christian alone?" This means a parish family. In fact,

it doesn't have to be an Episcopal church — which is certainly the best! — but to be in the midst of a group of Christians who love the Lord and are fed by Word and Sacrament is to continue in the ministry to which God called us. There is another dimension to this for those who understood their call to be priests. Standing at an altar and celebrating the Eucharist is a part of who we are. We need a little help to continue this dimension of our ministry. There are often reasons why a priest can not do this, because of bodily infirmity or simply that their only available parish does not provide the opportunity — even at a midweek early morning service once a month. But this privilege of the call to priesthood is not something that ends unless one really thinks that his or her “vocation” is to retirement.

Then there is the responsibility to the diocesan family. Remember, clergy do not “belong” to a parish; they belong to the diocese. (The spouse may belong to a local parish, but not the deacon or priest.) You support the diocese when you turn up at clergy events, Diocesan Convention, deanery meetings, etc. This is often ministry — just being there, supportive to the Bishop and other clergy. This is true even in those dioceses that do not give retired clergy the vote. There is a ministry of presence.

More and more retired clergy are active and able to serve the Church after that first pension check arrives. More and more bishops are beginning to depend heavily on their ministries in smaller congregations, and rectors are welcoming them to supplementary ministries in parishes. Those who do this benefit more than they realize as their own vocations are being fed by the opportunity to continue to live out their calling, although in a limited way. The beautiful thing about these ministries is that *you* run the ministry, and you can keep the spark in your eye and the spring in your step. You only need to do as much as you sign up to do. Your spouse can be as involved or uninvolved as comfortable.

When we first walked into the bishop's office, so many years ago, the call felt very personal and direct. It was between you and God, and somehow, the bishop was necessary. After years of ministry, with retirement on the horizon or already accomplished, that sense of vocation is much more diffused. It is easy to confuse ministry with “a job.” There have been ups and downs, disappointments, and the idealized Church turned out to have some problems we never anticipated. By the time retirement comes, the ministry seems to be more a matter of relationships, maintaining the schedule, conducting services, and, fortunately, a check every month. But the call was originally from God — and still is. The vocation can be nourished and maintained, or it can be allowed to wither and die. Is your vocation to retirement, or to the ministry of God and his Church?



The Rt. Rev. David Reed has been a bishop for more than half his life. Elected as First Bishop of Colombia at the age of 36, he served Colombia and Ecuador until elected Bishop Coadjutor of Kentucky. Married to Catherine, with five children and nine grandchildren, he recently took up bicycling seriously after a double knee replacement. When he was invited to be Bishop in Residence at St. Matthew's Church four years ago, he realized it was the first time he had been part of a parish community in fifty years.