

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Retired Priest in a Pew – A New Perspective

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On most Sundays, I sit with my wife of forty-five years and my early-forties son in a fifth row pew at the center of our parish's worship space. It's been five years since we've been attending the contemporary eleven o'clock Eucharist at our church of one thousand members. I usually wear a sport shirt and dress slacks, but no clerical collar. I never wear it, except when I'm assisting up front at the altar, which is not that often. I supply five or six Sundays a year at an east county mission church.

My primary ministry is as an agency volunteer, serving family members of the mentally ill and their loved ones.

In the time we've been members of this parish, the thirty-two year rector retired, an interim served for eighteen months, and several months ago, our new rector arrived from back east. He was born the year I graduated from seminary. Talk about feeling old!

It's been quite an experience, viewing parish life from other than the altar/pulpit, especially during a time of significant changes in parish life. The interim was a retired priest who had been a cardinal rector for more than two decades. I have been trained as an interim and served in this ministry five times. It was interesting to observe the dynamics of someone else as an interim. I had to keep my opinions within my family.

The new permanent rector's extremely extroverted personality is very different from that of our retired priest. He keeps us guessing as to what will happen next, during sermons and worship. The underlying theme of his message seems to be, "You folks need renewal in the ways I and my previous church experienced it." My wife and I are struggling with this, as I know some parishioners struggled with my personality and ministry approach.

When first out of seminary, I served as deacon-in-training at a parish where the former rector of twenty-three years had been elected Suffragan of the diocese a year before, and the current rector I served under had been in place six months. As a newly ordained deacon, I could sense and observe the conflict between the rector and members still close to their former priest. Now I feel this same tension within myself. I want to be open and accepting of our new young rector, but I miss our retired priest's sense of quiet inner strength and consistently excellent sermons.

As often is the case, however, a new priest attracts new and enthusiastic members. This has already happened in our Pacific Northwest parish. It occurred several times in parishes I served, including the heavily conflicted church in which I spent a year as a new deacon. This is a blessing for which clergy give praise and thanks to God.

When I first arrived at a church as rector, it didn't take long to discover those who were close to the previous priest. In one parish, the rector had become sort of a "guru," and his followers

often came to my office at first, seeking detailed advice on daily living. A few disciples of the former rector even took their families to live near their guru. In another parish I served, the priest and his wife dressed and acted like hippies, and several members soon dropped out of parish life.

I know I should be a good example to the church members of our present church home. I do share with them the fact that I know what our new priest is going through. This is a stressful time in his life and career. I went through it myself, several times. However, in my thoughts, I'm too impatient with him. To my wife and son, I'm too quick to criticize his sermons and approach to his new cure.

The positive side of a "pew sitter" is observing the actions and reactions of my fellow worshippers. I especially enjoy the young children when they join their families during the peace. When I was up at the altar or pulpit, I had to concentrate on the liturgy and sermon, with only a quick glimpse of the precious children as they knelt to receive communion or blessing. Now I see them drawing, scribbling, whispering to their parents or each other. It's a delight.

I observe husband and wife express affection for each other. I see parents hugging and kissing their children. Although teenagers sometimes appear bored, more often they seem interested in what's happening around them. It's intriguing to observe people sneaking a read of the announcements insert during the sermon. I notice many adults don't place anything in the collection plate, while young children usually place change or dollar bills.

After the Peace, when people share their gratitude for God's blessings in front of the congregation, I watch as those around me laugh or weep in compassion for those witnessing. Often what is shared brings tears to my eyes or a smile to my face. It feels good to be next to my wife and son, to express my affection for them, and to receive theirs for me.

The Praise Band, which leads our eleven o'clock Eucharist, is filled with talented musicians and singers. However, they sometimes are too loud, and this places a strain on my already impaired hearing. My wife and I think it's interesting that our other two sons and their families prefer a more traditional service and music.

In all likelihood, my memorial Eucharist will be at this parish. Our sons and grandchildren all live less than two hours from our retirement home. Every so often, as I kneel in prayer, I imagine my ashes on a table in front of the church, with my picture beside them. What will family, friends, church members, and priest share about my life and person?

Until then, "Lord, make me each day an instrument of your peace."



At the end of March, Don and Ann's sixth grandchild, Kiersten Ariella Greenwood, was born. She, her parents, brother, and sister, live just five miles south. Don celebrated his seventieth birthday in June, as he and Ann traveled to the Big Island of Hawaii. He continues as president of NAMI-Clark County, (National Alliance on Mental Illness) to which he volunteers an average of forty hours each month.

