

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## THE UNFLAPPABLES (as I knew them from 1972–1989)

*Walter C. Righter*

*Ad infinitum*, during my active life as an ordained person, I was told that the average Episcopal Church in the United States had fewer than two hundred members. Sometimes it was said as a way of establishing an identity with the rest of the Church. At other times, it was said as a way of protesting the support of small churches and raising an allied question: “How can we grow?” Seldom did I hear something else in the remarks of people, which is what this article is about.

Lots of small churches (although not, by any means, all of them) are unflappable in the work that they do in their communities. The contributions they make in terms of the general spiritual health of their worship and their work, and more particularly in the life of a diocese, are both unusual and constructive.

Two true stories about one congregation illustrate what I mean. The congregation of which I speak has about 75 families, and is located in a small community of approximately 8,000 persons. Until the 1830s, German was the language most people spoke. The Lutheran Church was the only other church in the community besides the Episcopal Church, and it was sizable, with some services in German.

The first story illustrates the willingness of the Episcopal Church and her people to enjoy, but treat seriously, change. It occurred after the years of liturgical reform. A person of taste decided that the old lectern Bible needed to be renewed and offered to give a fine new one — red leather, large enough to be noticeable on the lectern with large enough print to be easily read by any lay reader with normal sight. The Bishop’s committee accepted the offer of the gift, ordered it, and had it unpacked and resting on the lectern for the institution of a new vicar. It was, to tell the truth, a glorious-looking book.

The new vicar arrived, fresh out of seminary where he had learned that there were several translations of the Bible authorized for use in the Episcopal Church, and that the vicar was in charge of the forms used in worship. But he had something else to learn.

The translation of the Bible used in the new gift to the church was one he did not like. So he closed the new red leather Bible, placed it on the shelf under the lectern, and put a paperback book, with the translation that he preferred, on the lectern. He used it on one Sunday. No comments were made. The next Sunday, he stepped up to the lectern to find his place (which he always did a few seconds before reading) and discovered an old, worn leather Bible on the lectern. His paperback book was nowhere in sight. But it was too late to change things. So he

opened the pages of the old, worn book and began searching for the first lesson. Trouble was, it was a Bible written in German, a language he did not know at all. So even if he found the right page, he could not read what was on the page with any hope of giving it appropriate meaning. He acknowledged what had happened to him, and the congregation joined him in a good minute or two of healthy laughter. The senior warden produced the new red leather book and the vicar read from it quite easily. Lesson read, but more importantly, lesson learned!

The second story involves the same church celebrating its 100th anniversary.

It took two years to plan the celebration and complete the tasks that the congregation wanted to do. All the buildings were renewed and connected with a perfectly designed and artistic brick walk between them. My memory tells me they even had a new bell.

Their plan was to invite lots of people to attend and help them celebrate. Several national, regional, and local politicians' names appeared on the list. The invitation included the date and time of the anniversary service, the names of officiants from outside the parish, and — in a corner of the invitation — the words “Clergy: Festal Stoles.”

In due time, a letter came from the White House congratulating the congregation on their achievements and wishing them well in the next 100 years. It was signed by the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan.

The envelope was addressed to “The Rev. Festal Stoles.”

The day of the celebration, a lay reader was assigned the task of reading the intercessory prayers. As he began them, he read the clergy for whom prayers were sought, as follows — Robert, Archbishop of Canterbury, Edmund, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Walter, our Bishop, Alan, our vicar, and Festal, his new assistant.

The whole congregation broke out in hearty laughter. They enjoyed their anniversary, had a good meal and some very healthy conversations with each other, and, in spite of their laughter, had no resentment about the way the envelope from the White House had been addressed.

Both of these incidents illustrate my point about the unflappability of small congregations and their leaders. I believe their numbers are legion in the Episcopal Church. I believe that people are finding in those small congregations a way to cope with the nonsense of life and a clear road to the eternal truths for which we stand. I believe this means that people can say very clearly, along with Job, “I know that my redeemer liveth.”



Walter Righter spent January to mid-May 2009 in hospitals for two different surgeries and in rehab places for various degrees of rehab program. He is now home, driving his car, and getting out to lunch.

He was the second bishop in the history of TEC to be charged with heresy by ten of his peers; the Court for the Trial of a Bishop dismissed the charges. He authored a book, *A Pilgrim's Way*, describing that story.