

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## Liberating Retirement

*The Rev. David Cox*

“Why are you leaving the ministry so early?”

I got that question almost as often as the statement, “You’re too young to retire!”

Yes, I began receiving retirement benefits, thanks to the Church Pension Fund, at age 56 after precisely 31.125 years of ordained ministry. That was over four years ago. But neither question was correct in its presumption. I didn’t “retire,” much less cease diaconal and priestly ministries.

If anything, what the world—and the Church Pension Fund—calls “retirement” liberated me to minister in new and, for me at least, stimulating ways.

Some background. Ordained at the ripe age of 24.916, I followed the now-ancient pattern of high school to college to seminary. I was an assistant at one parish for three years, rector of a pastoral-sized congregation for twelve, then rector and college chaplain at R. E. Lee Memorial Church in Lexington, Virginia for the next thirteen. After a quarter-century of service as rector, the time came for something different. Thanks to seminary fellowships and the grace of the Church Pension Fund provisions for graduate study, I took a year to finish a book for Church Publishing Incorporated (do you notice a pattern here?) and a degree. As a result, I “owed” CPF at least another year of service, which I also needed to reach the age of pensionable maturity.

Meanwhile, a friendly neighboring bishop started inquiring if I would serve as interim rector in his diocese. One thing quickly led to another. Nearly as quickly, one parish led to another, then another, each for a year. The finances of that third parish, though, were such that I couldn’t afford to serve there *unless* I retired. Then, on recommendation of the bishop and by the grace of the Church Pension Fund provisions for work-after-retirement, I could, and did. That assignment proved to be the most exciting single year of my priesthood . . . so far.

In other words, CPF allowed me the chance to serve in a place I could not have otherwise gone, and where I had the time of my ministerial life. But what could top that? Besides, I missed being full-time with Melissa in Lexington. It was time, again, for something different, something closer to home.

So, as if to jump from frying pan into fire, I ran for public office. Namely the state legislature. That meant getting to know one person after another, attending meetings, finding out what hopes and concerns the people had, assembling ideas and articulating visions on the basis of ideals we hold, proclaiming them, organizing supporters, and, oh yes, asking for money: in short, the same sorts of things I loved doing in the parish, except I didn’t have to worry about the furnace, the Vestry, and the next Christian education program. I didn’t get elected, but other than the last hours of election night, I had a blast. I met wonderful people, explored a gorgeous part of the world, expanded my experience of Sunday morning worship (finding that there are some fine preachers out there but Episcopalians still have the best coffee hours), and gleaned a new perspective on both church and state.

One habit I continue: writing a (near-) weekly column for the local paper, exploring issues that conjoin politics and religion. This year's races provide plenty of grist for that journalistic mill.

Returning to reality, I had a bunch of offers to supply, fill in, or do interim work. I ended up in a congregation an hour away, whose rector, a friend, had recently died. That still occupies my Sunday plus another day a week, on average.

The dean of the local community college called soon thereafter, asking me to teach a course on comparative religion. That isn't my field, so he countered with a query about teaching ethics. I accepted, adding a course arising from research on the faith of Robert E. Lee, the Lexington parish's "patron saint." Another nearby college invited me to lead a section on American civilization, which proved to be thrilling. And after all, teaching is a traditional priestly task.

Knowing that a long-term board commitment was ending and imagining that I'd have "so much time" on my hands, friends started getting me onto community boards. I've long considered serving the community a part of *diakonia*.

I get to tend my own garden, literally, familiarly, and spiritually. As full-time parish priest, I was often too busy to keep up with weeding the flowers, painting the woodwork, or — truth be told — keeping up with either family or prayers. What the Church calls "retirement" has changed that, too. Melissa and I can visit our kids. I can spend a week with my nieces and nephews (and, by the way, their parents). I can attend "my" prayer group almost every week instead of sporadically, as before.

What's ahead? I never know. After a busy winter and spring, last May a peculiar set of circumstances arose and, suddenly, back I was in the political fray, running for the state senate. That didn't work out, either. But in the midst of an interview about all I'd been up to, a journalist remarked, "It sounds as though your life doesn't depend on winning this election." Bingo. I've been granted a rich, full life, with the freedom to respond to whatever life — or is it God? — may present.

Indeed, "freedom" is the operative word. I get to do what I want more than what I must. Sometimes I get paid, sometimes not; the fact that the Church Pension Fund benefits seem to get better all the time makes pecuniary concerns less important.

And, in the end, I realize anew that this is not "my" garden, "my" time, or even "my retirement." It's all God's. Nor does what "I want" matter: The Lord who called me into ordained ministry keeps letting me know what's up next. I'm never quite sure what "what's up next" will be. But "retirement," such as it is, has taught me to wait, listen, and respond — even as it's given me the freedom to do so.



David and Melissa Cox continue to live in Lexington, where she is active at R. E. Lee Church and he travels each week to St. Luke's in Hot Springs, which he still serves as priest-in-charge. David was recently elected as a deputy to the 2009 General Convention from the Diocese of Southwestern Virginia.