

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## Spiritual Renewal in Retirement

*The Rev. Don R. Greenwood*

“Me preside at not-for-profit meetings in retirement? You’ve got to be kidding!”

I dreaded Vestry meetings throughout my years as a parish priest. Vestry meetings too often brought out my darker side and did the same for some of my vestry members. The week before, I’d often call sympathetic members, asking them to support my parish goals. I’d toss and turn the night after the meeting, rehearsing what had gone wrong, the “victories” I’d won, the conflicts I’d lost, what I’d failed to “control.”

After retirement and a cross-country move from Ohio to the Pacific Northwest, I became active in the local affiliate of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness). Our oldest son has been a mental health consumer for twenty-eight years. I told my fellow NAMI-Clark County members I would only teach and lead support groups. I was determined not to become involved in the politics, but reluctantly consented to election to the board of directors. It didn’t take long to recognize the same dysfunction found in many parish organizations.

A year ago, our president resigned and moved out of state. For the past one and a half years, our affiliate had been like a ship without a rudder. Much had become undone, and our potential for support and assistance to family members of mental health consumers diminished. In May, I “volunteered” as the interim president, to serve until the January annual meeting and election. It wasn’t a surprise, what happened in January — my election as the president for a two-year term. Just too many productive changes had taken place, notably, a grant to hire our first full-time Executive Director.

Presiding at board meetings is by no means my favorite thing to do in retirement. However, retirement has brought a change in my spiritual life that has resulted in a change in the way I preside and lead. A daily life of prayer has made a difference in the way I react to challenges in the never-dull life of a not-for-profit. NAMI is an emotionally intense organization. Its members are passionate about helping family members and their ill loved ones receive respect and proper treatment. Classes and support groups, even board meetings, are often exhausting because of the emotional passion.

I wish I’d taken more time every day to pray and meditate as a parish priest. I’m certain I would have been a more loving and effective leader. At first, “The Serenity Prayer” was the cornerstone of my retirement prayer life. I repeated this prayer more than a thousand times. My familiarity with this prayer came from long-term participation in 12-Step groups. A turning point came when I realized that, the harder I prayed for serenity, the less I experienced it.

Soon after election as president, I began to pray “The Peace Prayer of St. Francis” frequently. A little book by James E. Adams, *Let Me Sow Love — Living the Peace Prayer of St. Francis*, was the catalyst. Inside the front cover, I wrote, “We don’t seek peace, we seek God.” Each morning, I begin my breakfast devotions with a reminder to seek God first, and then I repeat the profound prayer of St. Francis before the daily lectionary and my 12-Step devotional books.

In retirement, I realize how controlling and confrontational my personality becomes in reaction to fear. I experience a lot of fear in facing everyday life: a lot of it is fear of not being in control. Instead of putting first the needs of those I meet along my daily ways, I too often see them as “disturbers” of my peace, my serenity. Living out the St. Francis prayer has made a positive difference.

NAMI Board meetings are not the high point of my life each month. However, I don’t dread them as I did Vestry meetings. I’m more relaxed and less controlling during the meetings, and don’t toss and turn as much afterwards. I email an agenda a week before each meeting, asking board members to feel free to add items, and communicate this to the board.

I ask that the meetings last no longer than two hours, but I’m open to meeting longer if the discussion is relevant and polite. This flexibility and freedom mean less wear and tear on me emotionally and physically. I give credit to the Holy Spirit, allowing him to control what does or doesn’t happen at the meetings.

The Spirit has also helped me relate in a more trusting and flexible way to members of NAMI and mental health providers working for Clark County. I have more faith in the promises people make, and have discovered that the fruit of this trust is trustworthiness.

An additional challenge since receiving the grant for the financial package of our Executive Director has been dealing with authority issues. The county agency, which made the grant possible, originally stated that NAMI should remain independent. However, two of the community service department leaders started dictating, sometimes almost demanding, actions and deadlines. That’s when I began repeatedly praying, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace” before and after meetings with these individuals.

There are also my retirement and health issues. I have been retired for seven years. I am sixty-nine, and my blood pressure and cholesterol are under control much of the time, thanks to medications. However, when a retiree is willing to give freely of his time, he opens himself to further requests for his services. County mental health providers want more of my time than I’m willing to give. Sometimes NAMI members take me for granted. I’ve had to assert myself and tell providers and NAMI members that my family and retirement must come first. Sometimes they understand, sometimes they do not. Most need periodic reminders that there is more to my life than volunteering.

As the time for my departure from this life draws closer, I realize the importance of each day’s interactions. With the Holy Spirit’s continued help, I pray daily to make a positive difference in the lives of those stricken with mental illness and their families. I pray that I do this as an instrument of our Lord’s peace, as a peacemaker, not a frustrated, angry control freak. “Lord, every day make me an instrument of your peace.” Amen.



A year after retiring seven years ago, Don and his wife of forty-five years, Anna, moved to SW Washington State, to be near their five grandchildren and their parents. Anna has now retired after twenty-five years as a neurological registered nurse.

Don’s primary ministry during the last three years has been to mental health consumers and their families. He finds more fulfillment in this retirement ministry than his long career as a parish priest, and he expects to continue in this ministry as long as he is able.