

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## Living Alone

*Judy Wright Mathews*

“The best thing about living alone is that you can eat cereal for supper.” The woman laughed as she expressed what others have thought. Several others with her agreed. Some of us know that feeling of independence when we realize that we can do — and yes — eat, what we want — and when.

Over the past few months, a group of men and women whom I know — single, living alone, and receiving *The Vintage Voice* — responded to a questionnaire I sent, asking about their lives.

Considering the issue more seriously, another person described solo life saying, “I’ve learned to be happy within myself, and to enjoy my life when it is enhanced by being with others. Best of two worlds.”

Some of us don’t like living alone. Some have found other options if we decided not to marry, have not found a spouse or partner, ended a relationship, or when that special person dies. The monthly clergy and spouse necrology list tells us how often living alone is the result of the death of a spouse or partner. After the shock of death, and even during the mourning, a decision must be made: What is next for me? Many of us have decided to live alone. What is next, when living alone?

In what type home do we live? In my random survey, more live in houses than apartments, condos, or retirement communities. One respondent said, “I plan to live alone in my own home as long as possible, but I can see the definite advantage of a retirement home and have not ruled that out.”

Almost all the respondents said they maintain a vehicle for getting around. Getting around, however, is a problem for those who can no longer drive or don’t drive at night. Getting to the doctor is difficult unless a family member or friend provides transportation. Going to a grocery store or bank can also be a problem. Public transportation is seldom practical in many communities, and taxicabs are very expensive.

And what do we *do*, living alone? First, all surveyed said they go to church, sometimes attending alone, sometimes with a friend. One clergy widow said she has no problem going to church alone, adding “That’s what I did for most of my life.”

A majority enjoy volunteer work: hospice work, church committees, museum work, tutoring at schools. Age doesn’t limit physical activity for most of us. One respondent, who lives in a Southern city, says, “Many in our 75-89 age group play tennis, golf, swim, and hike.”

All but one respondent said “yes” to the question of spending time reading. Book selections range from theology and devotional books to historical and classic novels, biographies, and current best-sellers. No surprise there, as reading is a perfect solo activity. Books-on-tape help tremendously for those with vision problems.

More of us travel alone; more dine out with friends than alone; more go to movies with a friend/friends than alone; and an equal number go to parties both alone and with a friend/friends. More than half of those who responded said they invite guests to a meal at her/his home; and half said they give parties in their homes.

Nearly all, men and women alike, said “yes” to the question about cooking and/or preparing meals. More than half have household help and assistance with yard work, but nearly all do laundry.

This description of living alone thus far resembles the lives of couples. Yet many events of the secular world, as well as those of our Church, are created for the family or for a couple — a pair of people who live together. Therefore, a “single” must be willing to forge ahead and go to events alone. Some of us call a friend and ask for a ride to a party, if that friend is also invited. For the shy person, male or female, going to a party alone can be frightening. One woman was told, “I can’t believe you’re going out by yourself.”

The woman replied, “If I don’t go by myself, I would never go out.”

After all the practical tasks are done, and after going to church, enjoying movies and meals with friends, and, for some, golf or hiking or swimming, there are the ghosts. There is the ghost of that special person and at times the ghosts of the people who came into our lives because of what we did and how we did it. Living alone means dealing with being alone and adjusting to it.

In Will Campbell’s book, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, he writes about his brother’s description of being alone: “. . . Being lonesome is when somebody isn’t there and you know they’ll be back after a while. Being lonely is when you don’t have anybody to be lonesome for. . . .”

People deal with living alone differently. One woman said that, when she was widowed, she knew that, as an introvert, she needed to intentionally seek new things and new experiences in order to find a new life, because “it was easier for me not to.” After her husband’s death, she thought she would never experience joy again. “But I discovered I was very wrong and found much joy in unexpected places and times.”

Another respondent said, “My dog is so much company, living alone is no problem. I praise God that I’m able to do what I can do to spread His love.”

The first time one widow lived alone was after her husband died, when she was fifty four. “Of course I’ve been sad and lonely a lot of the time, but it’s also been a growing and learning experience. I’ve learned much about myself and have done many things and made many decisions I never would have imagined I could do and make alone.”

Another expressed life alone this way: “Anyone can be as happy as they choose to be — or as lonely or miserable. I choose to embrace whomever and whatever comes into my life. I feel that, with God in my life daily, many concerns and frets and worries are put into perspective and can be handled. Living alone makes one aware that it is entirely possible to become a little too self-centered — not a good thing in the general scheme of things in this world.”

Asked to share her thoughts on living alone, a retired clergy woman said, “I love the solitude and peace and quiet.”

One of the male respondents said, “For myself, living alone is a spiritual adventure.”

We who do live alone are strengthened by our faith in God and bonded by the Church Pension Fund. Moreover, we are bonded and strengthened by our extraordinary Episcopal Church, which holds together all of God’s children — in “. . . all sorts and conditions. . . .”



Judy Wright Mathews, the widow of the Rev. Lex S. Mathews, discovered that most of those who write for *The Vintage Voice* do *not* live alone, and she wanted to explore the subject of those who do — *for* those who do. She is a member of Holy Comforter Episcopal Church, Tallahassee, Florida, and works part-time for a state health agency. She has two children and three grandchildren.