

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Connections

The Rev. Dr. Timothy B. Cogan

My retirement at age 67 was given a little push by high blood pressure and high scale-tipping, as well as weariness from trying to keep up with high school students one-quarter my age. So catching my breath was a positive aspect of getting out of harness and having time to get into shape.

But the negative side was suddenly losing the daily connections with young and old friends one has as a school and college chaplain. And my guess is that clergy especially (but also pediatricians and general practitioners, too, I'll bet), experience a more complete and severe disconnection than most professionals, because we've been so involved in people's lives. We've been the "parson" (the person that everybody knows) in the communities and towns we've lived in, and the center of attention in the parish, week by week, no matter how modestly and humbly we disclaim caring about that.

Two years before I retired, my friend Fritz left as rector of his parish of many years and moved to a large and beautiful old farm in Vermont, visions of bucolic bliss dancing in his imagination, no doubt. When we saw him after that first winter, he was moving on again. Why? Because the place he had chosen was full of people who didn't have the slightest idea of or interest in who he was. He'd spent most of his time on his tractor, mowing the vast acreage, and when he went to the store to get supplies, he barely got nodded at. So he left the beauty of the Green Mountain State and moved to a town where he had once served many years before but still knew people. And, more importantly from the point of view of my story, they knew him.

So when the time came for me to retire, I was aware — painfully aware, to tell the truth — that I was going to miss a lot of the people, young and old, who had become important to me. It was going to be a real wrench. What to do about it? What to do with all that time? What could fill the "connection-void"?

Sometimes, the older we get, the more we realize how lucky we can be. Good things happen when we don't expect them, and personal plans can work out better than we had hoped. Getting connected in my new retired state had some of both. There were four sets of connections that eased the sense of separation we retired folk are bound to feel.

The first connection came thanks to the rector of my once-vacation/now-retirement parish (St. Andrew's, Edgartown, MA). Unthreatened by the seven old codgers in his parish, Bob Edmunds invited us to coffee and doughnuts on the second and fourth Wednesdays of the month. Sitting around a table in the parish house, we were able to exemplify the truth that, at our age, "we are meant to be exactly the way we are," as our senior colleague Hal Tilghman put it. It was wonderful to say exactly what we thought and know that, even if the others didn't agree with everything, our ideas and feelings about life, love, and the Episcopal Church were listened to — not always the case when you're "on the shelf."

The second was family. In four short years of retirement, Ruth and I went from “0-to-3” grandchildren. Two wonderful daughters-in-law have taken over the responsibility of raising our thirty-something sons. Though we don’t see them as much as we would like, we’ve taken to having “Baptism Weeks” on the Vineyard during August, featuring the Grandchild of the Year, with all in-laws present.

The third connection is the only one I thought up myself. I decided that since I had lost my school congregation, I would create an “e-congregation” to whom I would preach “e-sermons.” And so, four or five times a year I “preach” to them via e-mail. Who knows whether or not they get as much out of it as I do . . . they are busy young people. But they claim to want the e-sermons to keep on coming, and each time I send one out, one or two of them will e-mail back, saying that the e-sermon hit the nail on the head or spoke to some aspect of their lives just when they needed a boost. And with those notes comes an update on what they are doing with their lives and some good wishes for Ruth and me. Just when I think it’s all silly and I’m wasting their time and cyberspace, someone will express genuine appreciation, and so another e-sermon is written.

The last connection is one that makes the winter pass more happily than I could have imagined.

For one reason or another, the church I had been attending during spring vacations for twenty years needed someone to fill a part-time position. The rector was someone I had known in his and my days as curates, many long years ago. Though that position was permanently filled, I was kept on as a part-timer (fine by me), and being part of a clergy/laity team in a large parish, assisting with worship, teaching adult courses and youth confirmation class, and enjoying the collegiality of a lively and bright group of people, has made the winter months fly by pleasantly and with just enough sense of purpose to keep me using my brain!

Other connections from the past have enriched my retirement. I became Chaplain at King’s College, Cambridge, through one of my former Princeton graduate students. I go to Maine and Connecticut and New York and Florida for weddings of former students, and baptisms of their children. And Ruth and I, about to celebrate our fortieth anniversary, have never felt luckier or more grateful.

Connection, connection, connection! What a boon!



The Rev. Dr. Timothy B. Cogan is the Chaplain Emeritus of Brooks School, North Andover, MA, where he served for 17 years after 13 years as Episcopal Chaplain at Princeton University. He and his wife, Ruth, who taught ceramics at Brooks, live on Martha’s Vineyard half the year. During the winter, he is an Assisting Priest at the Church of Bethesda-by-the-Sea in Florida. He is a Senior Member and Associate of King’s College, Cambridge University. In 2004, his seminary, Virginia Theological Seminary, awarded him the degree of Doctor in Divinity for his service in the educational ministry of the Episcopal Church as a chaplain and teacher.