

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## That was a Humdinger!

*Walter C. Righter*

Ever wonder about the effectiveness of sermons? I have, lots of times. This is a true story about a retired person who was aroused to affect change on behalf of others. He was inspired by a sermon preached by my assistant, the Rev. Laurence Miller, from the pulpit of the Church of the Good Shepherd, Nashua, NH, where I was the rector from 1954 to 1972.

What place do sermons have in the age of the sound bite, instant communications, and the speed with which we move around, physically and intellectually? My sense is they are a quiet but potent force not only in the lives of the people who hear them, but in the lives of those who are affected by the behavior of those who hear them.

Eliot Carter was one of the leaders in the community of Nashua, NH, and a member of the Church of the Good Shepherd. He was directly involved in bringing new economic life to a city that had lost its economic moorings when much of the textile industry moved south. When I met him, he had just retired from an executive position in a family-owned business. He was sixty-five years old. For the entire time of my ministry in that community, he was, in spite of his retirement, an active part of efforts to make Nashua a viable place to live for all ages and for all sorts and conditions. The city needed a new library. After careful thought and research he gave one million dollars to make that possible. The teachers in the public schools were at an impasse with the school board. When he discovered that a closed meeting of the school board was being held, he called the clergy of the three largest churches in the city. With him in the lead, we broke into the meeting and made the case for breaking the impasse. He was losing his sight because of macular degeneration and walked with a white cane. He told me one day that he always admired the paintings of Corot. Since he began to lose his sight, he said, he was very fortunate — because he could now see a Corot painting every day of his life. He was both a realist and an optimist. He never liked to accept a ride anywhere. He liked to walk. He chose, on his own, to call on shut-ins whom he knew well enough to try to brighten their lives somewhat. Each Sunday, along with his wife, Edith, he sat in the front pew and listened carefully to what the preacher was saying. Some days, he would leave, suggesting in firm language that the preacher did not know what he was talking about. He once told a member of his family that sermons were a matter of setting up a number of “Indian clubs” in order to knock them down. At times, he would stop in to see the rector during the week to chat about the sermon. Once, he came out of church and said, “That was a humdinger!” It was a sermon preached by my assistant, the Rev. Laurence Miller. That was not the end of it. Eliot had heard something in the sermon that day that prompted him to act on behalf of others.

In our parish of 2,300 baptized persons, we had two very large families. The Goodwins had eighteen children. Twenty people were living in four rooms in a building that was decidedly unsafe. The kitchen was the only heated room. Alice, the mother of a slightly smaller family, had twelve children. Her husband was serving a term in the state prison. Alice lived in a large area of an empty factory building. The only heat she had was a stove for cooking plus the occasional wood fire she built and watched carefully. The people of the parish I served did their best to be helpful to these two families, but the needs were huge, and their housing was controlled by absentee landlords. Our Bishop, Tod Hall, visited them one day during a weekday visit to the community. The visit was arranged ahead of time. The Bishop promised both the Goodwins and Alice that a change would be made. Neither he nor I knew what it would be, but we were sure it was our responsibility to do something. Eliot was really moved by the “humdinger,” as he described it, to attend a meeting about decent housing, held in the poorest section of the city of Nashua. The meeting was organized by VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) to see what the people who lived there could do about absentee landlords and decent housing. When Eliot arrived at the meeting with his white cane and his fine clothing, he was immediately recognized. He had run for several different offices and had not ever succeeded. The meeting came to a halt and one of the people stood up and said something like, “Mr. Carter, why are you here?” Eliot stood up and said, “I know what you are trying to do. I’m here to try and help. I ran for mayor of this city and lost. I ran for governor and I lost. I ran for Senator and I lost. But in the process, I learned a lot about government. I’m here to offer you what I learned as you try to do what needs to be done.” Then he sat down while the people discussed his offer, their attitudes changing from suspicion to welcome. With Eliot’s help, the city’s laws were changed. Within a few months, housing for people like the Goodwin family and Alice and her family was made more available in decent places at reasonable rents. Absentee landlords were forced to be more responsible.

“Humdingers” are sermons that are alive and useful. Preaching has a place of real power in the life of liturgy. Preaching has a place of real power in the lives of people. Preaching has the potential of making the lives of listeners more complete, and the life of our society safer and richer.



Walter and Nancy Righter have recently experienced health issues that have resulted in several operations. In December, their fine Golden Retriever died of old age — 98 by human standards. Their families have been wonderful, visiting and keeping in touch, giving them a focus beyond just health. Walter still enjoys reading, especially biographies. He occasionally helps out with discussion groups and he and Nancy both enjoy watching movies at home.