

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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What's Next, Lord?

The Rev. Cornelius deWitt Hastie

At age seventy, thinking I was fully retired (except for occasional Sunday supply gigs and a monthly vesper service at senior housing two blocks from home), and after a career which kept veering from what I expected, I summarized my spiritual activities to my bishop as follows: "Mornings I bag groceries in a Roman Catholic food pantry, and afternoons I play bridge at a Jewish Community Center." "Good for you!" my bishop replied. Little did I know how God would continue to surprise me!

One of my former Sunday school students asked me to visit his aged mother, at the nursing home next door to the senior housing where I conducted the monthly vesper service. But she was comatose, about to be moved to an intensive care facility. Her son introduced me to Gilbert P., the lonely elderly Episcopalian in the next room, whom he had befriended. Before I knew it, I promised to visit Gil weekly. I then went upstairs to see a different resident, Gifford G., from my own parish where I was now Rector Emeritus. Gifford immediately asked me to help with the third floor weekly ecumenical Bible study group, which was multi-denominational and multi-ethnic.

Almost immediately, I canceled the monthly vespers and began leading two weekly groups, with systematic Gospel readings of one chapter per week and a five-minute truncated ecumenical Eucharist, 9 a.m. at the senior housing and 10 a.m. at the nursing home. I then shared a shortened Gospel lesson and Communion with Gil. Half a dozen Roman Catholics participate in each of the two groups of twelve to fifteen seniors; they no longer have a regular chaplain, and half of them receive Communion. I bless the others. I read my Interpreter's Bible faithfully, and thoroughly prepare each week.

Two years passed. One morning, I looked in the second floor day room — and there was Polly, one of my regulars from the senior housing next door, who had just moved to the nursing home. I gave Polly her Communion, and could not ignore the dozen or so other patients in the day room, so now I had a third weekly group. Following our brief service on Sunday a new patient said to me, "I agreed with everything you said. Are you a Jehovah's Witness, like me?" "I am an Episcopal Jehovah's Witness," I replied. I stress the role of the apostles as witnesses, and she always receives Communion. Anna, who is Jewish, usually attends. When she is present, I read a psalm especially for her, and she blesses me in Hebrew.

One Sunday this past winter, on my way to the elevator, I was passing the rooms of the first floor short-term patients and I happened to glance at the name next to a door. The patient was the seventy-year-old older sister of one of my first altar boys from fifty years ago! Betty was happy to see me, and to have weekly Message, prayer and Communion for the next month. When I

mentioned this to the receptionist at the front desk, she exclaimed, “You give Communion? I’m a Methodist, and I hate having to work the first Sunday of the month and miss Communion.” So now, every first Sunday, she and I say the Lord’s Prayer together at her desk, and I give her Communion.

Sophia, a Baptist from Virginia who moved to Boston to be near her grandchildren and had just lost one leg to diabetes, was not in her room the second Sunday I looked in. I found her in the next room, visiting Mary, another elderly African-American woman from the South. I asked Mary if she would like to have Communion with Sophia and me. “No,” she replied. “What church do you belong to?” I asked. “I haven’t belonged to any church for many years.” “What church did you stop attending?” “Pentecostal.” “Well, when Jesus fed the multitude, all he asked was whether they were hungry. Think about it.” By the time I finished Bible study, Mary was saying, “Hallelujah!” After the three of us shared Holy Communion and a final prayer, I said, “What warmed my heart this morning was to find the two of you visiting together, as sisters should, not each sitting alone in separate rooms. I think God is pleased with all three of us.” Mary has now gone home; her replacement is eighty-year-old Frances, a Methodist originally from North Carolina, who raised seven children in my Roxbury parish neighborhood.

A month ago, an old friend telephoned and complained to my wife, Linda, that she felt the diocese had completely neglected and forgotten her, an almost nonagenarian clergy widow. Her senior living complex, less than three miles from us, provides a Jewish Sabbath service, and a Saturday afternoon bus to parish Mass, but no Protestant or Episcopal services. I paid her a visit the next morning, and told her that it did not seem right to me to be giving weekly Bible study and Communion to dozens of elderly widows who are mainly non-Episcopalian and new to me, and not offer her the same. Now Linda and I, along with a new senior resident, join our old friend in her living room at 1 p.m. each Sunday. The new resident, who plays bridge with me on Fridays, attended the Cathedral School for Girls in Washington, D.C. for twelve years, and overlapped our old friend at college in the early 1940s. Our Bible study is particularly interactive and lively, and we pass the sacrament from hand to hand.

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The Rev. Cornelius deWitt Hastie is Rector Emeritus of St. John, St. James in Roxbury (Boston), MA, where he served two thirteen year stints: as seminarian, rector, vicar, priest-in-charge, and *pro bono*, along with thirty-nine years as founding director of St. James Educational Center, and twenty-two years as Protestant Chaplain at Suffolk County House of Correction. Neal and his wife, Linda, who was Director of the Episcopal City Mission’s Boston senior housing high-rise Morville House, live in Jamaica Plain. Boston’s sole representative at the 1990 White House Rose Garden twenty-fifth anniversary of Head Start, Neal is a recipient of the Special Recognition Award from the Massachusetts chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the John Phillips Award from Phillips Exeter Academy.