

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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A Smile Is a Wonderful Thing

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Twice this past year, I have been amazed by statements people made to me in unexpected places, at unexpected times.

The first time was in St. Louis, MO, where I had tagged along with my husband, Charles, to visit with longtime clergy friends while he conducted a weekend storytelling conference. The church rector and part-time associate rector and their spouses had once served in the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast, where we spent twenty good years.

On Sunday, after the church service at which Charles preached, I came down the aisle and greeted him at the door, along with other members of the congregation. When I somewhat factiously shook his hand, Charles said, "There is a man over there who wants to speak to you." I was dumbfounded, and asked who he was. "I don't know," he replied. "He just asked me if my wife was with me because he needed to speak to her."

Hesitantly, I walked over to the man Charles had pointed out and introduced myself. "You wanted to speak to me?" I asked.

"Yes, I did," he said, after telling me his name. "You probably don't remember, but two years ago, my wife and I were taking some time off, sailing around Florida and up the East Coast. One Sunday, we found ourselves in Apalachicola, FL, and we decided to look around the little town. We got as far as the Episcopal churchyard, where there was a monument to a doctor who discovered the principal of air conditioning. As we read the inscription, it started to rain.

You were on the front porch of the church, and when you saw us in the rain, you called out to us and invited us to come to the church service which was about to begin. We are both Episcopalians, but we had not planned to go to church that day. You said, 'It doesn't matter if you have on church clothes. Come in; I think you'll like it.' We did come in, and we did like it. Everyone was so friendly.

My wife could not come with me today because we have something going on with our grandchildren, but when I saw in the paper that your husband was going to be preaching here today, I had to come and tell you how much it meant to us that you invited us to church. During the rest of our trip, **NO ONE ELSE INVITED US TO CHURCH OR SPOKE TO US WHEN WE WENT!**"

Needless to say, I was overcome by the fact that he had made such an effort to come thank me for such a small thing. I had not asked them to sit with me, I had not told them I was the bishop's wife, I had not done anything but smile and welcome them to church. To me, his story said a lot more about what others had not done than what I had done.

This past August, we were vacationing with friends who have a cabin in Maine. We went to their local church with them on the Sunday we were there. The only other time we visited there was three years ago, when we also attended this lovely little church. We went in and were seated. Just before the service began, I noticed an attractive couple come in and smile and wave to someone. I looked

around to see if our friends were waving back, but they were looking in another direction. I couldn't decide to whom these people were waving, but I smiled vaguely and then the service began. I forgot about them as we began the hymn.

After church, our hosts led us to the parish hall, where coffee and pastries were offered at a coffee hour. As I made a detour to the bathroom, the same couple approached my husband and introduced themselves. They asked where I was and he told them I would be right back. When I returned, I was greeted by warm smiles and told their names. Then one of them said, "We remember you from when you were here three years ago. As the congregation was leaving the church, you spoke to us and introduced yourself. We were so struck by the fact that you were the visitor but spoke to us, instead of the other way around, that we have made it our ministry since then to speak to all the visitors who come to our church."

Again, I was astounded. I was the person to whom they were speaking and smiling before church!

It seems to me that all of us need to be aware that we have a ministry to give the church and each other. Even if you are shy, a smile is not so hard to give. A warm hello or a short conversation — "Glad you are here." "Please come back again." "I don't think we have met." — anything! People are looking for warmth. They are looking for a place to belong. They are looking for a place where someone knows their name.

When we lived in Fayetteville, NC, in the 1970s, our church was in a constant state of flux. The Vietnam War affected active army members from Fort Bragg who attended our church, and many business companies moved middle management employees frequently. One of my ministries was to speak to two or three new people every Sunday. Some of them never came back. Some did. Some turned out to be wonderful friends and hard workers.

The parishioners of every church I have ever been to in over forty years of marriage to a priest and bishop think that they are a friendly church. Usually what that means is that they are friendly among themselves. Newcomers frequently have to work their way in by sheer determination. My dream is that no one will ever again be surprised when they are greeted warmly at church and engaged in conversation by someone who truly is interested in them. Who better to do this than us, persons who have loved our Church and worked for it in some capacity over the years? We are comfortable in church, we know our way around the prayer book, and if we go regularly, we may be aware of newcomers on the Sundays they are there.

Try tossing smiles and hellos around. The results may amaze you.



Nancy Rice Duvall is the wife of Charles F. Duvall, retired Bishop of the Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast. After twenty years' service in lower Alabama and Florida's Panhandle, they now live in Columbia, SC, near their three children and their spouses, and six grandchildren. Nancy edited *Crosscurrent*, East Carolina's diocesan newspaper in the 70s, served on the Board of the Presiding Bishop's Fund for World Relief (now ERD) for six years, and also on the Bishops' Spouses Planning Group. She loves to read, write, garden and travel, and recently began to write poetry.