



About the Authors

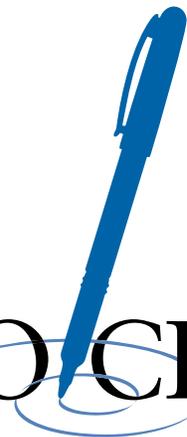
The Rev. Ben E. Helmer was ordained in the Diocese of Northern Michigan and spent his active years of ministry in Western Kansas, West Missouri, and the Diocese of Arkansas. He was elected to the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, and appointed an Officer for Rural and Small Community Ministries at the Episcopal Church Center in New York. After retiring, he served as chaplain to the Diocese of Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina, and was appointed Archdeacon in Micronesia (Guam and Saipan). On his return, he was called as Vicar of St. James' in Eureka Springs. Today, Ben and his wife Jane live in Holiday Island, Arkansas.

Ken Kesselus served mostly small congregations over his 31 years of active ministry, served as a deputy to four General Conventions, and was on the national Church's Executive Council from 2000 to 2006. He was honored as Texas Rural Minister of the Year and Distinguished Alumnus of Seminary of the Southwest. Author of histories and three biographies, and former Mayor of his hometown, Bastrop, Texas, he now plans to join his wife, Toni, traveling and spending time with grandchildren, and doing whatever he can to help people in any way possible.

About Vintage Voice

Vintage Voice is a monthly publication for retirees of the Episcopal Church who, in sharing their stories, help deepen the sense of community. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Articles are published with the authors' permission. If you have a reflection about your life in retirement, consider writing for the Vintage Voice! Send your submissions to vintagevoice@cpf.org.

VINTAGE VOICE



Back Where We Started

A return to small Church towns after life on the national stage

By The Rev. Ben E. Helmer and The Rev. Ken Kesselus

This past summer, during one of our periodic “checking in” phone conversations, awareness of General Convention sent us on a trip down memory lane.

Each of us is happy in retirement (and eternally grateful to The Church Pension Fund), but for a moment, we both felt a twinge of missing “the big show.” After all, we each had served as deputies to various General Conventions and spent six-year terms on the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, hobnobbing with presiding bishops and the like.

Ben went on to serve at the Episcopal Church Center in New York as the congregational development officer for rural and small community ministries. Ken spent a few years as rector of a resource-sized parish in Waco, Texas.

Both of us have had the privilege of being nominated for Episcopal elections. The Holy Spirit drew us into the process, but not as the person chosen. Those enlightening experiences left us grateful as they lead us to being able to more clearly discover our true callings.

Those days are now a decade and a half passed; we retired under the 30+ option at 58 and 56, respectively. During that phone call, we reflected on those days with a bit of nostalgia, wishing that just once more we could be a part of the national stage. Ken even admitted to feeling like a “has been.”

Quickly, though, the conversation caused us to reflect on our years of full-time ministry. Ken reminded Ben of how we first got to know each other. After Ken was appointed chair of a small church task force for Province VII, The Rev. Mary Kay Bond, who was doing a seminary-required field education stint under Ken's mentorship, facilitated their meeting.

Knowing the passion that both priests had for small churches, she insisted that Ken reach out to Ben and “waved a magic wand” that initiated a wonderful 25-year friendship. At the time, Ben was working half-time at a small parish in Western Kansas and half-time as Canon to the Ordinary of a diocese filled with small churches.

We met at the Austin airport. Ben, after deboarding a Southwest flight, found Ken standing their holding a tacky, limo-driver imitation sign with Ben’s name written on it in magic-marker. Not long after, we realized how much we had in common. In addition to sharing a love for small-church ministry, we were both born in 1947 in small towns and had grown up in small Episcopal churches.

Ben’s father was a priest in the Diocese of Northern Michigan. Ken spent his pre-college years in a tiny Texas church at which his father served with dedication for 40 years in significant lay roles.

We also discovered that each of us had served only small congregations, as both seminarians and ordained clergy. This created in us a shared passion for empowering clergy and lay leaders in resource-poor churches, presenting strategies for development and vitality to help them move beyond “survival-mode.”

Having heard too often from experts who advised us to “pare their suggestions down to size,” we worked to build creative options geared specifically for small congregations. As Ben enabled Ken to better carry out his role with the task force, we understood that the opportunity to engage at the diocesan and national levels allowed us to advocate for those in often-forgotten places.

Our shared passions and common interests led to a long-distance friendship that eventually included visiting one another’s homes and getting to know our wives and families. It probably helps that while Ken is a “motor-mouth” extravert, Ben is a listening introvert.

Now back to that phone call after convention. The more we talked and recalled where we both began, with the personal-touch opportunities in small congregations, the more the lure of the wider Church faded.

For each of us, a major benefit of the Pension Fund’s early retirement was again being able to engage in the one-on-one pastoral ministry that is such a potential strength in small churches that we both learned almost by osmosis in our native towns. Ken has written for the *Vintage Voice* previously about his efforts after he officially retired, working at an electric cooperative in a role that might best be described as industrial chaplain. *Read Ken’s story*

After Ben retired, he went to Louisiana for a year in late 2005 as a Diocesan Chaplain to help with the recovery after Hurricane Katrina. In 2007, he moved to Guam for 18 months to help four small congregations better work together in the Episcopal Church in Micronesia.

Now, we each may finally claim to be “fully retired,” but still continue to be engaged in what may well be a life in the Body of Christ, that is not less, but perhaps more significant than the national stage. Ben has settled permanently in Holiday Island, Arkansas, and Ken remains for good in Bastrop, Texas. Each of us has gladly accepted opportunities to fill in on Sundays from time to time at the small churches in our towns and respond to other calls for services.

We are both happily back where we started. With thanks to Bishop Lawrence and J.P. Morgan, as well as to a century of responsible stewards of the Pension Fund, we look forward to our last years in joy and financial comfort.



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