

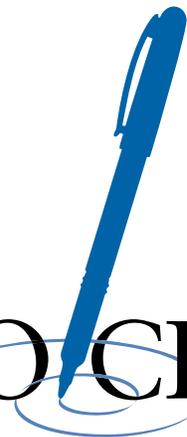
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About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



Ministering in a New Way at the End of My Life

By the Rev. Robert J. McCloskey, Jr.

I retired from parish ministry on January 1, 2000, as rector of St. Stephen's Parish, Coconut Grove in Miami, Florida, having spent 33-plus years in parish ministry in four dioceses: Massachusetts, Western North Carolina, Long Island, and Southeast Florida. Since then I assisted for several years in a large African-American parish in Miami, followed by more years assisting and supplying in mountain parishes in Western North Carolina, where my wife Kay and I have made our permanent home. All in all, some 15 years of "retired" assisting in distinctly different environments.

For two decades Kay and I had a getaway cottage in the English Cotswolds, during which time I assisted frequently in historic Tewkesbury Abbey. Kay, a born-and-bred English woman, has spent much of her time in extensive perennial gardening in our mountain home. Since our return to a very rural county in the Blue Ridge, Kay has been very active in St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, where I was rector in the 1970s. She also has chaired the Women's Fund of the Blue Ridge — a fund-raising organization offering financial assistance to agencies dealing with women and girls at risk. In recent times I have participated in St. Paul's, Wilkesboro, first as a part-time staff member, where I assisted in liturgical planning and led adult classes. More recently I have enjoyed sitting in the congregation and watching a terrific new rector find her place liturgically and pastorally. The next phase of our life was in place, and then...

In late July 2015, after an annual ultrasound prompted an MRI, I was discovered to have inoperable liver cancer. In August, the oncology team gave me six months to live. Kay and I shifted gears, using some time to travel. My oncologist was aware of our enjoyment of travelling internationally and in the United States, and so he urged us to take time to do this. Primarily we used our time to plan ahead, to draw our children closer together and to prepare for my death and Kay's life thereafter. As I write this, I approach the thirteenth month of living with my cancer. My medics tell me that I am "in the hands of a higher power," and that their prognosis was a median point between two extremes. All of my labs and diagnostics

continue to remain “within range,” including my liver function, despite the continued growth of the tumor (originally the size of a grapefruit) and metastases in the lung and other organs. My oncologist has become a very dear friend.

In all of this I discovered that I had been given a rare opportunity to minister in a new way. I could now speak about how I was preparing for my death and why I do not fear it — and what in my faith has informed and bolstered that belief. We have sent out emails to a wide circle of friends sharing the news. We have made a point of sharing it in our parish newsletters. I have discovered that my approaching death has allowed me to model what I firmly believe about dying, death, and “last things.”

The response has been incredible: scores of messages from friends and former parishioners as the word spread, some of whom I don’t even remember. A frequent response has been, “You are so stoic,” to which I reply, “No, my faith has allowed me not to fear death.”

I commend this unusual opportunity to any who, like myself, have suddenly received their “pending death notice.” It truly is and has been for me a new and enriching ministry.



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