

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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## Call to Ministry

*The Rev. Steve Norcross*

“So how did you come to be called to the ministry?”

This is not a question that I was expecting. My doctor had ordered an upper GI test, and I was scheduled for a procedure at the outpatient facility near my home. The nurse who got me ready asked me a long list of questions about what medications I was taking, how recently I had eaten, and what I was allergic to. At what I thought was the conclusion of his questions, he asked me the unexpected one.

I have given some thought as to why I found the question surprising. For starters, I wondered how he knew I was a priest. Dressed in that universal tie-in-the-back horror that they call a gown, I surely wasn't in clerical garb. I suspect that, some place on my medical record (now computerized), my occupation was listed as “Episcopal priest.”

Another reason for being surprised is more complicated and more socially telling. I am not all that used to having people express much interest in religion, given that I live in the Pacific Northwest, a part of the country that has historically been populated by a high percentage of people who claim no active church affiliation. I have often commented that if I had a dollar for everyone who has said he or she “grew up in the Episcopal Church” — implying that they no longer attended — I would not need my pension, because I would be independently wealthy.

My final reason for surprise was the nurse's age. He appeared to be about the age of my adult children, possibly a few years younger. At the risk of over-generalization, my view of that generation is that Sunday morning is not a time for church, but rather a time for sleeping in, getting housework done, exploring the great outdoors. I'm delighted to see members of that generation in church, but such is not the norm in my world.

The question begged a response. I replied with an answer that I have given in the past. I love the worship of the church. I liked it so much in high school and college that a roommate wisely suggested I might as well make a career of it. And so I did.

I am grateful that this person took a little extra time (a premium in a busy medical facility) to go beyond the checklist and ask me a bit more about my life. I don't recall any

particular reaction from him to my answer. I was probably glad that he didn't challenge me in any of the ways some others have: by preaching to me from the perspective of another religious faith — or lack of religious faith; or by challenging the validity of my calling, which came, not as a direct revelation from God, but quietly. Instead, his response was the best imaginable in that moment. He was curious; he asked the question; he considered it; and (I hope) was pleased with what he heard.

A daily meditation in a recent issue of *Forward Day by Day* explored the possible range of calls to faith. Some are so dramatic that the believer can name the day and hour, much like the apostle Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. The author of this meditation wrote that his was a far more gradual living into the faith that he had been a part of since birth. As a cradle Episcopalian, he had never known not being part of a faith community.

I'm not a cradle Episcopalian, having been confirmed at age twenty-five, then on to seminary and ordination a few years later. I am, however, a cradle mainline Christian, with a background that did not emphasize dramatic conversions. I did not become a Christian in a blinding moment, and I did not make an immediate choice to enter the church's ministry. Both were results of years of growing awareness.

Had there been time (again a rarity in a busy medical facility), I would like to have asked the young nurse how he chose his vocation, which is every bit as noble as the ordained ministry. Did his decision come as a blinding and binding certainty? Or was it a gradual growing into a realization that this is what he wanted to do with his professional life? I wish I knew his answer.

Next time I have to go to the hospital for some procedure, and the nurse or doctor comes in with a checklist, I will be hoping for a similar question. This time, I'll be ready with a question of my own, leading perhaps to a more thorough conversation that compares and contrasts our experiences and career choices. I look forward to it.



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