

Protagonist Corner

How's Retirement?

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How's retirement? I have been asked this many times since July 1, 2009. My responses have varied depending on who is asking, how I feel at the time, what is happening, or what my calendar contains. Over all, I have been surprised by some of the challenges.

Usually, my first response to the question is, "After 47 years of ministry, often going 150 mph, I find it difficult to go 15 mph." Decelerating so quickly has often made me dizzy, disoriented, and even depressed after coming off rewarding mountaintops. The euphoria of retirement at 69 ½ soon gave way to feelings of restlessness and boredom. A fellow minister admitted it took him years to adjust to not being "the go-to leader" whom people sought for wisdom, love, and encouragement. I, too, have felt sometimes bypassed by people and communities.

This Lenten issue of *Journal for Preachers* probably has references to the spiritual disciplines of fasting, prayer, patience, meditation, etc. All of these I have practiced over the years, but usually for better preparation in carrying out God's calling for me to serve in positions as preacher, pastor, and servant leader in the congregations I have served, ranging in membership from 150 to 3,000. Now, without those roles, these disciplines are not as easy to keep up; yet they are even more necessary. Studying and journaling are especially difficult. However, daily devotions with my wife, Joan, are the sparks to start my days. Also, this is a great way to fight the demons of being in the season when we live with twice the spouse and half the income. I still have lingering influences when thinking my worth is in what I do or accomplish.

"Hanging on" can become "hang-ups." I was confronted with this when deciding what to do with my 5,000+ books, all of which were old friends that needed good homes. I finally gave the vast majority of them to my last congregation, suggesting they could make a donation to the church's life and mission. The remaining books I kept for personal and family use.

Some clergy hang around their last congregation, resisting retirement. I would recommend they move away or at least give the new pastor grace and space to fulfill his or her calling without any (even indirect) influence.

Joan and I retired from our last congregation in Wethersfield, Connecticut, and moved to Black Mountain, North Carolina, where we have connected with old friends and made new ones. Because of our location we have also enjoyed visits from folks in our previous congregations and our family who are scattered from California to New England to Florida. These two years we have been busy with Joan's health issues as well as changing our cabin into a home named after a Scottish site, *Rest and Be Thankful*. We have sought out new avenues for ministry and friendships, because trying to break into established networks has been interesting.

When I transferred as "Honorably Retired" into Western North Carolina Presbytery, I was asked this one question: "What is the most important Presbyterian doctrine?" Others being examined were asked other questions and answered appropriately

within about ten minutes. I felt really challenged to do the same, especially having written my 400-page doctoral dissertation in systematic theology. Standing before my new presbytery, I said only this, "The Sovereignty of God's Grace." To me this is revealed in Jesus Christ and scripture. Actually living this belief is easier said than done. Therefore, the following has become one of the most important passages in my retirement:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:4-7)

In retirement, "rejoicing in the Lord" does not have a schedule to follow or an ecclesiastical responsibility to heed. I believe my Lord is telling me, during this season, to celebrate each day as a gift to enjoy with every person or event I now encounter and to trust that the Holy Spirit will use me for God's glory in spite of my retirement, my older years, my memories, my hopes, or my going 15 mph.