

The long view – Mark Rudall explores How retired clergy can harvest their experience and become encouragers to those who minister in a very different ‘now’.



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It was a bitterly cold winter day. But heavily armed with an oxy-acetylene blow torch, a Stilsons wrench and a copper-faced mallet we were dismantling the heavy boiler we had just removed from its accustomed setting with the aid of a convenient oak tree, a block & tackle and a length of chain. Wrapped up as warmly as possible in overalls, gloves and a woolly hat, my companion commented: ‘Of course you realise we could both simply spend our days playing golf!’

Wiping the frozen dew-drop off the end of my nose, I reflected that neither of us play golf or have any desire to, but a lot of our friends do. However, our present project was immensely satisfying and well worth the trouble. It was the boiler from my small steam river launch that, last summer, rather embarrassingly failed as I was about to take friends out on the river to enjoy companionship and sunshine, maybe even a glass of wine. Having determined what, precisely, had failed, we were on the way to restoring it to health.

All my life as a writer and clergyman I have been a closet engineer fascinated by old technology. So much so that over many years particular care had to be taken to ensure that hands and fingernails were clean enough to Preside on Sundays. Eight years into retirement I became a Vice President of one of the heritage organisations that celebrates what to me are fascinating aspects of the UK’s colourful engineering history. Most importantly, it brings me into contact with an amazing range of people. Yes, some are Christian while others are as divorced from Christian and Church life as can be imagined.

Essential lubricant

I make no apology for slightly indulgently banging on about my interest in old machines, because I noticed many years ago that whether we are looking at Christian or secular assemblies of people, the human dynamics are precisely the same. All people groups have something in common with old engines: without the right lubricant they will break down and may fail completely. There are endless different grades of mineral and vegetable oils used in the mechanical world, but in the human context the universal lubricant is ‘grace’. The Grace of God is a central concept in Christian theology, but at every other level of society there will always be failure if some level of its human outworking is missing.

In the high-level business world grace is often notably absent. Senior officials are paid outrageous salaries and bonuses designed to outweigh the risks inherent in a hiring, firing, graceless culture. Money and power are the primary drivers in those cultures and people have no faces because they are merely the tools to achieve those ends. For that reason, we should not be surprised to observe that when those cultures intrude into the world of volunteer organisations and common-interest communities it results in tensions and maybe even disaster. The essential lubricant to restore smooth running is, as always, grace.

There used to be a praise song sung in certain churches that began ‘Bind us together... with cords that cannot be broken’ and I agreed when a colleague suggested that it should really have been ‘Grind us together’. Certainly clergy, who have seen the best and the worst of human dynamics in

daily life and ministry over 40 or more years, are well placed to enter retirement equipped to be of real use in any groups, Christian or otherwise, that they might join. We are uniquely placed to be 'oil cans' tactfully administering that essential lubricant to smooth out any rough running and generally help to introduce, as far as possible, a level of Grace in whatever business has to be transacted.

For that reason perhaps it's inevitable that a reasonably outgoing retired member of clergy should find themselves regarded as a kind of pastoral figure, almost a 'chaplain' to any secular group in which they gain a profile. That has, I know, happened for retired colleagues involved in golf, tennis and bowls clubs; others I know have quietly found themselves involved in pastoral care as members of U3A, book groups or neighbourhood associations.

The other side of that coin is that not all retired clergy are outgoing, and others may have had that characteristic eroded out of them. I know some who have entered retirement with palpable relief, because their ministries had been over-demanding and deeply stressful. Their marriages or other family relationships had sometimes foundered under the weight of it all and they themselves had suffered distress at the hands of difficult people or been bullied in some way. So not for them PtO¹ or a part-time chaplaincy: they might also remain wary of deep involvement in an 'interest group' – even one like the hobby association that has given me so much delight over the last 30 years.

Sometimes, those hurts will be permanent. A sense of the pervasive Grace of God and the joy of the Gospel has been lost and a trickle of disappointment seeps through an ageing personality potentially tainting the twilight years.

Harvesting experience

Retirement happened extremely suddenly for me when a debilitating medical condition made its presence felt rather abruptly at age 59. Very few people seem to have heard of Myasthenia Gravis, but, amazingly, mine was caught early, biting me suddenly at a conference for Anglican communicators and, ironically, stealing my voice. I had driven there holding one eye open because the lid was drooping – a classic symptom. A highly supportive and generous Diocese offered retirement at age 60. Five years later drug reduction in very small increments over an 18 month period left me almost entirely in remission and probably as fit today as many contemporaries. But at first the unexpected retirement was like falling off a precipice – from extreme busyness to almost nothing: no demands; nothing screaming for instant attention.

Fortunately, I had my freelance writing of occasional newspaper and magazine articles and a range of other practical interests. The ability to play music gradually returned and, as strength improved, creativity was restored (with dirty hands) in the workshop, which became as important as the study. There was creativity too (with relatively clean hands) in the kitchen. Dynamics changed, inevitably, when my wife also retired some four years later, but the creativity continued. PtO has been renewed for a third time, there are many opportunities to preach, preside or share ministry in other ways, and nine years into retirement I feel both blessed and grateful - to God and the Church of England. I also recognise an outworking of the Grace of God towards me through the kindness and encouragement of others. I can't see that I'm deserving in any way, but I live with a spirit of thankfulness.

It would be wrong to think that retirement is about 'shutting down' or 'switching off' the people we have been during our working lives and jettisoning our experience and giftings. Quite the reverse in fact. In retirement we can start to reflect upon and to harvest those insights we have acquired over our years of ministry. Indeed, it could be argued that we have a duty to do so. That's because we enter retirement with something of a 'long view', having seen the way things change and develop

over our decades of work. We may not have the energy or physical resilience we once enjoyed, but we certainly have powers of observation and analysis rooted in experience, plus a level of emotional resilience that we might have wished we had at age 30.

Thus our 'stock in trade' as retired priests is probably not the same in terms of the dynamism we may have had during those years as Rector of St Trinian's-in-the-Vale: but our depth of insight, our sense of 'seen it all before' has acquired a certain maturity and become case-hardened to some extent.

Just as every journalist and PR person knows that the average government or Royal scandal ceases to be newsworthy and will mostly subside within almost exactly 11 days, so we know that the same is true in parish life. We know that the average parish imbroglio over removing pews or changing a pattern of worship may be miserable at the time but will also lose its steam quickly.

Having seen it all before we are in a good position to analyse with some accuracy, why certain people are protesting or throwing toys out of prams, and we can offer those insights to those on the receiving end of their tongue lashings. If we can offer to take a younger, probably very stressed, incumbent out for lunch and offer support as the flak flies about, we can offer perspective and encouragement. That may facilitate the return to the real stuff of ministry when Mrs/Mr Smith and their angry co-complainants subside into slightly disgruntled lavender/whisky-scented silence! There may be no grace in them, but the incumbent has seen some, and gained useful perspective in the encouragement received from an older colleague.

An older lady whose first name was Grace put up a barrage of criticism about some minor issue in a Church where I was serving. She was a good and decent woman, a little haughty sometimes, but caring, and a new focus was needed. I felt quite justified in saying to her: 'You have a very beautiful Christian name, but bearing a name like that is always going to be a responsibility. You need to remember that in the things you say!' There really was no answer, she took it on the chin with real grace and life was much more pleasant thereafter, but I can't help reflecting that all who would call themselves Christians also carry with them a debt to grace.

At one point in starting his letter to his friends in Rome, St Paul almost seems to be groping for the right words to express how he feels towards them: *'I pray that now at last by God's will, the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong - that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.'*²

I have always been aware that a vital 'stock-in-trade' for anyone involved at any level in Christian ministry, has to be the ability to encourage others. That may sometimes demand the essential lubricant aforementioned!

There can be an important caveat to this: I know that some retired clergy would not necessarily agree. Indeed, as a Diocesan Director of Communications I became aware of a number of clergy who felt judged, even manipulated, by a retiree living in their parish 'who didn't like the way things were going' or who actively sought to influence others wanting to take the church backwards in time or traditions: 'to do things properly!'

But the Church cannot look backwards and it is not a museum. A comfort to many elderly people because of its innate conservatism, perhaps, but the Body of Christ was born at Pentecost to be dynamic, in every sense of that word. It has to cut through the very different mores of our present age in which our message, just as it was for St Paul, seems to be perceived as simply a 'foolishness': a delusion, an emotional crutch for those unable to stand the pace.

It is no accident that levels of clergy stress are currently sky high; it is also no accident that the tabloids have no difficulty digging out colourful stories of clergy who have crashed and burned. The lures of money, sex, web pornography and drugs lurk to trap Christians and unwary clergy exactly as they do for people who would profess no interest in faith. We can be sure that those pressures, together with, for example, diocesan finance challenges and the safeguarding demands for churches in socially challenging areas, weigh heavily. Other pressures might include the succession of programme initiatives and demands for mission plans and so on currently dropping on younger clergy in pastoral charge. Thus, failures can be expected to become ever more frequent.

I was always grateful to the colleague who once defined 'ministry' to me as, simply, 'love the people; tell the story'. To do those two key tasks successfully, the contemporary Church and its leaders need arbiters of grace and encouragement as they struggle to serve the Church as it is today.

All-male bishops of the past were traditionally regarded as 'Fathers in God'. Today, however much bishops might seek to be to be 'Parents in God', to their clergy, they can no longer realistically fulfil that role, for the pressures of the age weigh heavily on them too and their time is limited.

On retirement I felt the best way to encourage the vicar of the church where I worship would be to offer to fill 'at the drop of a hat' any sudden emergency slot that might arise for him. I've been at it a long time and am not fazed by lack of notice; neither do I have a young family demanding my time. I can stay up all night to prepare something if needs must. Happily, it's a resource my vicar uses from time to time. Maybe there's a funeral he can't do, or he has to pass a service to me at the last moment because of a Covid-related situation or a sudden demanding pastoral crisis. Although invited, I don't attend strategy and planning meetings because I would not necessarily be a helpful presence.

I have a long view of the past which can be helpful, but the future is not mine. An older cleric sitting in the corner who everyone knows would love to say something is a problem for everyone. I note that my vicar asks if I might care to be responsible for Remembrance and other special – or traditional – services, maybe because he sees my generation as having a stronger sense of engagement with those other than his own.

He's very affirming and I make a point of encouraging him in any way I can, even when something is not necessarily to my taste, and it often isn't: but he's the one called to minister to the present generation in a world of constant change. Perhaps most stark, for me, is the fact that I find much of the music we use fails to speak to me at all, but as required, I'm there to help with double bass at the ready. Sometimes I metaphorically grit my teeth as I play, while also hugely enjoying making music with younger people. Grace has sometimes been required, helped by remembering that while what I am contributing to may not be what I want, others may be uplifted by that very same material.

To put our personal preferences aside as we gather as part of the Body of Christ is at the very heart of grace and the encouragement that can flow out from it. Grace, for the people of Christ, is rightfully at the very root of their day-to-day theological praxis. It should remain so in retirement and all the more for retired clergy, who I suggest, have it within them to be extraordinary resources to a struggling Church.

Holy Week 2022

¹ Canon C 8 of the Canons of the Church of England provides that a minister duly ordained as priest or deacon (referred to as a cleric throughout the policy) may officiate in any place only after he or she has received authority to do so from the diocesan bishop in which that place is situated.

² Romans I vv 10-12