

A Structured Way In Which Preachers Can Think About Their Retirement

By George Lovell

This article provides a structured way in which preachers can engage creatively with what *might continue (or is continuing)* into and what *might be new (or is new)* in their retirement phase. The possibilities identified derive from: conversations with retired preachers and what they have written about their experiences and by speculating about my own imminent retirement from a long preaching ministry. Preachers can select from the list of possibilities, which, if any, apply to them, add others and describe the characteristics until they arrive at a representative profile of *their* experience of retirement. The aim is to help preachers to understand, interpret, negotiate their retirement, treat it as an integral part of their vocational life and live with it happily and creatively.

What might continue into retirement?

This section is about aspects of preaching ministry that might accompany preachers into retirement and which, to differing and varying degrees might remain with them throughout this phase.

Gratitude

Looking back on their ministry preachers might well feel greatly honoured that God, the Church and countless congregations have entrusted them with opportunities to pursue their sacred vocations. Acknowledging this with humility is a proper antidote to unhealthy feelings of being “special”, commonly experienced at the outset of ministry. Being given a preaching place in the work of God’s kingdom is an enormous privilege. Gratitude can grow and deepen in retirement.

The abiding reality of the call to preach, the sense of vocation.

One thing most likely to remain with preachers is the knowledge that they were called to preach and that for a long or short period of their lives they did so from church pulpits, but no longer do so. What follows shows that this does not necessarily mean the end of a preaching ministry. The “I was called” and the “I am called” convictions can continue to coexist throughout the retirement phase. When they do, preachers are greatly blessed in retirement.

Continuing opportunities to preach with a small “p”

Preachers in retirement might still have informal opportunities to expound, communicate and work out the implications of the Christian faith. They could do this in various ways through: participating in house study groups; private conversations and correspondence; editing past sermons, writing and publishing sermons. These activities stimulate continuing study and reflection. They provide opportunities to work at contemporary issues of faith and Christian living. Members of a congregation of an esteemed colleague of mine, a Roman Catholic Missionary of Africa (formerly known as White Fathers), who greatly valued his sermons, petitioned him to continue writing weekly sermons and to make them available to them on a website in his retirement.

Continuing to live out the implications of their vocation.

Living out the implications of their vocation by practising what they preach is a continuing important aspect of preaching ministry. Generally speaking preachers have to contend with ageing processes, his/her and that of his/her spouse, loss of energy, constrictions, failing health, dependency, etc. Living out the Christian faith in relation to these circumstances can be challenging. Doing so effectively is a profound Christian witness and can cap the preacher’s ministry.

Continuing conversations about the faith.

Pastoral conversations about faith can obviously continue throughout retirement along with the sharing of experiences and problems. Some exchanges are limited to a single but meaningful conversation, others continue for years leading to soul friendships. Some involve the meeting of like minds, others clashes of belief. All of them can stimulate thought and spiritual insights. These retirement conversations, often rewarding and satisfying, are a privileged extension of the preachers' public ministry.

Continuing membership of and contributing to the fraternity of preachers.

An abiding sense of belonging to the fraternity of preachers can remain and be a continuous source of satisfaction to retired preachers. Ongoing relationships with preachers provide opportunities to share and explore ideas and to discuss things of common concern and interest. Retired preachers might have opportunities to offer moral, spiritual, intellectual support and stimulus to other preachers especially those starting out on their ministry; they may be able to act as coaches, consultants and mentors. Then there is the continuing ministry of prayer for preachers and for the preaching ministry of the church universal.

The desire and yearning to preach.

The desire and yearning to preach may well persist or recur periodically. This can arise, for instance, at moments of deep disappointment and frustration during a service when the preacher squanders or wastes the opportunity presented by an occasion full of potential and charged with expectation and promise. The soul of a retired preacher, like that of any other cries out, "O for the opportunity to preach the sermon I feel is desperately needed". Another situation in which the desire to preach can surface occurs when a text of scripture or an event "speaks" to the retired preacher and the idea for a service emerges. Such experiences can give retired preachers a hard time. They highlight the great privilege of having had outlets for animating thoughts that burn in a preacher's bones and the loss of it. Some preachers find relief by composing a sermon even though they know it will not be preached and possibly sharing it with their friends or even publicising it on the Internet. Other outlets, possibly more widely used are: to discuss their thoughts privately (see points 3 and 5 above); to "preach" them informally (see point 3 above). Clearly much personal discipline and grace is called for in him dealing with these urges creatively.

The public reading of scripture

Domestic circumstances unfortunately prevent a retired minister from preaching. He misses preaching but he is able to read the lessons in church and he loves to do so. During the week before the service he researches the passage and reads it aloud to his wife each day. Members of the congregation look forward to the occasions when he reads. One person said that she loves to hear him read, "He brings the passage to life, opens it up and interprets it simply by reading it. To hear him is a spiritual experience. You hardly need a sermon when he reads." Quite independently he has said to me, "Reading scripture publicly gives me fulfilment, joy and satisfaction. It is as though I have preached." The perfect match between the experiences of reader and at least one hearer demonstrates that he has indeed "preached".

Opportunities to reflect and to evaluate your preaching ministry and vocation.

Retirement can be a good time for preachers to reflect on and to evaluate their active preaching ministry and their vocation, the good and the bad times. Whilst they can never fully compute the effects of their ministry they can attempt several things: to discern patterns; to trace out the highs and the lows; to rejoice in the times when they knew that they were used by God; to explore and face up to their disappointments and regrets and, where possible to make amends; to deal with outstanding issues or to lay them to rest. After ten years in retirement George K. Barr, reflecting on his preaching ministry, reviewed

forty-three loose-leaf binders containing the remnants of the sermons he had preached and a slim binder containing addresses he had given since retiring. He concluded, "I did try to cover a wide spread of subjects, but as I look over my barrel [of sermons], I now realise the opportunities I missed, and I am aware of sermons I failed to preach". To work critically at his unease he used his New Testament scholarship to produce a thematic lectionary based on the preaching of the Early Church. Presented in contemporary terms, he concluded that these themes are relevant to the lives people live today. This gave him a biblical template by which to make a more balanced judgment of his preaching. (*The Expository Times*, T and T Clarke, Vol 115 Number 7, April 2004, pp 223-228.) This is an illustration of but one way preachers can work at any unease or disappointment they may have by examining the actualities of their preaching performance against an objective format. A quite different approach that stimulated me to think about my preaching ministry is a novel by Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*. (Virago, 2004). It is the moving and profoundly perceptive reflections of an old retired American minister, aspects of which rang true to my own ministry. What emerges from attempts at critical reflection can inform sharing with other preachers (see point 6 above). Above all, constructive reflection through listening to and dialoguing with the past, can help preachers to get a more balanced view of their ministry as a whole, to lay it down and to offer it to God's use, care and keeping.

(One of the things I intend to do is to identify changes over the years in the context of and emphases in my preaching and to attempt to relate whatever emerges to changes in my understanding of Christianity and the religious and secular context in which I ministered.)

What might be new in retirement?

Obviously, briefly stated, major radical changes and adjustments.

Changes in the rhythm and pattern of life.

Gone is the round of the preaching circle, anticipation of appointments; preparation; preaching; reflection. The pressure is off! Initially that might be a relief but it will be missed until its place is filled by other rhythms of life. It will possibly be felt as a loss that has to be bereaved.

Adjustment to the changing need for preparation and objects of study.

Dissonance and tension, which is difficult to resolve can result from the demise of the need for collecting preaching material and the changing aims and outlets of study. Throughout the industry, preachers tend to be on the lookout for ideas and illustrations and note and store them. Such habits of a lifetime of preaching die slowly and tend to be operative long after their usefulness. Changing them can be difficult. More problematic are changes in the aims and uses of studies. Should retired preachers, for instance, continue with studies that they have pursued for their ministry and which still interest them? If so, what is the new impetus and focus? Some preachers do not need a goal; studying things has its own reward, and learning for learning's sake has its own driving forces. Others need a goal, tangible outlets for the learning that emerge from their studies, writing, discussion, etc. (see point 5 above). For some, the focus becomes learning for living the full life, for exploring and understanding it and for engaging in creative conversations about Christianity and polemical exchanges in order to become even better informed and equipped Christian disciples and to lead a deeper devotional life. So the driving motivation comes from within the preacher and from contemporary interests, tempered by the ageing process.

Downsizing.

Associated with all this are some irksome questions. What to do about the collections of books, reference material and manuscripts of sermons and the domestic disagreements about competing solutions! Material that is stored electronically does not, of course, present storage problems.

Identity as a preacher.

Preachers retain their self-identity as preachers whether or not they are publicly recognised as such. But they will remain known as preachers by the congregations they served. This can be a source of pride and confirmation of an important part of who and what they have been, and, which, in their soul still are, but it can be a source of the tensions which have been discussed.

All these factors are interrelated and interactive, sometimes positively, at other times negatively.

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