

Late in Life Changes

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Recently I asked Kathleen Capcara, our Lay Associate for Parrish Life about sharing thoughts about my late-in-life ordination as a deacon. She countered by asking if I would talk at an adult education event some Sunday about the general concept of people making changes later in life. I remembered comments by several members of Trinity who have asked me the question, “What is a deacon?” Others have asked about when I became interested in ordination as a deacon, and whether I was going to be ordained as a priest. Out of these unrelated but connected events, today I want to share some of my story that leads to my ordination as a deacon in the Episcopal Church in 2012.

First a bit of background. I started life in Forestville, Maryland, at our family home, which soon became part of what is now Andrews AFB at the start of the Second World War. We moved to Montgomery County, near Rockville, and I ultimately graduated from high school in Bethesda, MD in 1954. Fast forward to 2012 for my ordination, at the ripe young age of 76! Thankfully, I was still living in the Diocese of Spokane, not yet in the Diocese of Maryland, which would not have ordained me at that age.

A related “Late in Life” change occurred a few years earlier, when I became bored with retirement, and took on a leadership role in a non-profit that provided housing for those with severe and persistent mental illness. First a brief explanation about this non-profit leadership role. When I retired in 2003, my wife, Mary Beth Jorgensen and I moved to Idaho, near a golf course, I envisioned a life of leisure. Unfortunately, I was a lousy golfer, had little patience, and soon knew I needed something more challenging. First I took a job with the City of Hauser, ID as treasurer, which I hated and quit in less than a year.

After some time, I stumbled on a job with a non-profit that housed individuals with mental illness. Almost without understanding what the job would be, I started in 2008 as Administrator for Trinity Group Homes, Inc., which had 17 beds at that time, three of which had been vacant for a year. By the time I retired again in 2015, Trinity Group Homes had an expanded capacity of 33 beds with a ten person waiting list. It turned out that my building and construction background and business and grant writing experience were just the right combination they needed. Running and expanding this non-profit was the most challenging and rewarding job I ever had. It called upon my business skills, volunteer experience and my faith. I had fun and achieved a lot in those seven+ years running something that successfully grew and expanded to serve a critical need.

Thinking about my life prior to ordination, one of my first responses takes me back to the charge that the bishop makes during the Episcopal Church’s ordination service for a deacon. The Examination during ordination, the bishop addressed me and said:

... You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world... At all times, your life and teaching are to show Christ’s people that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself. (The Book of Common Prayer, p.543)

Reflecting on this charge again in preparation for this discussion made me think about my life in the church. I thought about when I have encountered God – even if I didn’t know it then – and about how I have responded. I am a Cradle Episcopalian and have attended an Episcopal church my entire life, beginning with my baptism and family in Southern Maryland. Looking back on my own early faith, I realize that my faith was very shallow during those years. I had little knowledge of the Episcopal Church, and limited personal understanding of the Bible, or even of Jesus and what he represented.

This changed later, starting on my first weekend at college in 1955 after my parents left me in my dorm room at Georgia Tech in Atlanta and headed home. I woke up the next day. It was Sunday and I was petrified – what had I

done? Why did I leave home? Where was anything remotely familiar? Then I remembered seeing an Episcopal Church two blocks away. Although I'd decided to give up church earlier that summer, the nearness of an Episcopal church seemed so comforting. I walked to church and sat near the pulpit. The service was refreshing, soothing and I felt totally at home. As I started to get up from the pew, the hand of God, in the form of the elderly woman (a lot younger than I am today!) who was sitting behind me, grabbed my shoulder. She said firmly ... "*You ARE coming to Canterbury tonight, aren't you?*"

That one step, listening to God's voice from Mrs. Wolfolk inviting me to come to the college Canterbury Club service, catapulted me into a huge learning experience. My time at Canterbury during the years 1955-1960 was a mind-blowing, life changing experience, an introduction to theology, service, and worshiping in a special faith community. I also wrestled with my response to the Civil Rights movement that swirled around us. This experience changed everything in my life, centered me on Christ and started my journey, the one that I continue today.

Another encounter with God occurred in the middle 60's when I spent the night wandering the streets of my neighborhood, wrestling with God and with myself. I was at a decision point in my professional career, but suddenly I had woken up thinking that I needed to turn down the job offer and start studying for the ministry. This was such a strange and unsettling idea that I was unable to go back to sleep, and started to walk the neighborhood about 3:00 am, struggling with that crazy idea and talking to God. God listened but said very little. Finally, I made a decision – or deal—or compromise with myself and with God that I would use my work and my jobs, as well as my volunteer experiences, as a vehicle to help people, particularly the minorities and women in the workplace and in the world. For the 55+ years since, that has been my ministry, both as an active layperson and as a member of the wider community, and more recently as an ordained deacon.

Another encounter with God happened in late 2008. As the Diocese of Spokane's EfM Coordinator, I had arranged for an Education for Ministry Mentor Training event in Spokane, where our Diocesan offices and Cathedral are located. I picked up the California trainer at the airport and we had lunch prior to the first session later that afternoon. Midway through our conversation at lunch while I was telling her about my life, she stopped me and said point blank, "*You need to meet with your bishop immediately and start studying to become a deacon.*"

You could have knocked me over with a feather. But this time I knew God was really talking to me. The rest of that weekend I paid lip service to the training, but spent most of my time thinking about the trainer's challenge and her comments. On Sunday morning, I arranged a meeting with our rector and our assistant priest. These two meetings affirmed my call to study becoming a deacon, and thus my journey towards ordination began. From the first "call" in 1955 until 2008, it is obvious that I was very slow in responding to God. However, I now realize that God's timetable is different from ours. And no matter which city I lived in, or which Episcopal Church I attended, I always found ways to help those in the communities in need, through feeding, housing, emergency services, refugee resettlement, or whatever was the most pressing issue in these communities at the time.

After my decision that fall of 2008, I immersed myself in learning about the diaconate, reading many, many theological books, and taking seminars and completing on-line courses. I experienced many opportunities to learn more while I served and worshipped in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and during my three month assignment at a church in Spokane, where the bishop had arranged for me to do field work. All of these experiences led to changes in my life, and in my understanding of the diaconate and my ordination in 2012 as a deacon at the young age of 76.

My field work in Spokane was very valuable. I was worshiping with a new community and was able to observe and study a congregation with several active deacons. The mentoring by the rector and the deacons in that congregation was one of the biggest blessings in my formation as a deacon in training. This blessing has expanded, educated and informed me and has shaped my own understanding of the diaconate.

From the time I completed my postulancy and started the formal Deacon Formation seminars after becoming a candidate in 2011, until I was ordained in October 2012 and continuing here at Trinity, I have continued to increase my knowledge of the history of being a deacon and our specific roles and responsibilities. Many times, I have been asked that question that many deacons hear: "*What will you be able to do when you are ordained that you can't do*

now?” In other words, “*Why on earth are you wasting your time becoming ordained, in particular, given your advanced age?*”

There are simple answers on the one hand about liturgical functions that ordination permits that are not possible without such a process. But for me, these are not the answers that make sense or justify the time and effort that I have spent. For me, much of why I was seeking ordination is centered in a couple of concepts. One, which came as a total surprise, is the privilege of preaching. This platform has allowed me an opportunity to reach people that I would never reach in any other way, people who would not volunteer for an outreach project, but who might be impacted by some part of my sermon, maybe changed, maybe challenged, maybe led to new avenues of faith and service.

The second focus of my ordination as a deacon is my life in my community. For me, Matthew 25:31-46, where we are charged by Christ... **to feed the hungry, give something to drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit those in prison...** says it all.

While I was working in Idaho, I got to know a wide variety of people in the community - public officials, law enforcement, non-profit leaders, clients of a homeless drop-in center, the children and adults and staff at other shelters - as well as the residents, staff and board members of the non-profit where I served as executive director. I suspect that some of those I knew in Idaho, or other cities where I worshiped, or maybe even some of my Trinity Episcopal Church members, might laugh at, or at least question the time that it has taken to become ordained this late in life. Others may stop and listen and maybe act on some aspect of what I talk about; others may be touched in ways that I don't yet understand. But I know based on many years' experience of wearing my crosses that this visible sign of my faith frequently creates opportunities for dialogue that might not have occurred without that visibility.

One of those encounters was with a homeless woman who lived day-to-day in a motel across the street from my office. Once she learned of my belief in Christ, she came to my office several mornings a week, asking me to pray with her. I stopped what I was doing, stood with her in the middle of my office, and prayed with her. She came to see me, and strengthened my own faith. She is an alcoholic, attempting unsuccessfully to recover, an incredibly faithful person, giving when she has no or very limited resources, yet a strong person of faith. Believe it or not, we are still in weekly phone and letter communication, now over two years since I left Idaho. She calls to share her journeys, to talk about people she has helped, to fill me in on her life, and to find out what I have been doing lately here in Maryland. She is a real touchstone of my faith journey.

The late Rev. Archdeacon Ormonde Plater who died in 2016 was a pioneer in the community of deacons. Writing in *Diakoneo*, the journal of the Association of Episcopal Deacons, Ormonde described what he sought in a deacon:

This is what I'm looking for:

Deacons who are sensitive to the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. Who recognize and record them. Who look about them at the peoples and sights of their neighborhood. Who listen carefully to the words and sounds about them, where they live and where they worship. Who have the gift of interpretation (this is not just about foreign languages). Who can recognize, analyze, and explain.

Deacons who have new ideas. Who have the freedom to try out their new ideas, no matter how chaotic they seem at first. Deacons whose bishops are smart enough “to select persons with evident gifts and fitness,” prepare them in “basic competence,” and finally, most importantly, turn them loose on the church and the world and support them as they lead the church in ministry. If we have all that, it won't matter that the church, her bishops and her deacons and their ideas, are some orderly and some chaotic, some dumb and some smart.

My life has changed significantly since the fall of 2008 when I answered Christ and started my journey towards ordination. I have developed and expanded my prayer life. I have continued to read widely about the church and about the diaconate and the day-to-day work of being a deacon. I have experienced many new opportunities to learn

at the congregations I've served in Idaho, and now here at Trinity in Towson. In addition to my role here at Trinity, I also serve in several ways within the Diocese of Maryland as a member of two deacon-focused committees.

Recently, I was asked by Bishop Chilton Knudsen, Assistant Bishop of Maryland, to serve as her deacon for her visitation at a neighboring congregation. During the service, Bishop Knudsen introduced me and invited anyone who wanted to know more about the role of deacon to see me at the back of the church. Since that Sunday, I have been in an informal mentoring role with a man who rushed to find me after the service. We met that morning in a corner of the rector's office and exchanged phone numbers. Since then, we meet about every 4-6 weeks, usually for coffee or lunch, and I answer his questions, loan him my books and papers and challenge his resolve. He shares with me what he has been doing, personally and at his congregation. We pray together, we talk by text, email or phone about issues and challenges. He explored ordination as a deacon, but was unable to proceed due to his age. He is now exploring ways of assisting others at his congregation to explore more deeply their faith and how to take action.

I also have maintained my life-long passion for helping those in my community to meet their basic needs for food, housing, and jobs. Serving as Staff Liaison to Trinity's Outreach Committee, and for a short time as Acting Chair, I have continued my role as a Christian first and as a deacon second. I am blessed to still be able to help others implement my diaconal role. I have been challenged here at Trinity, particularly when an assisted living facility for memory care residents asked if Trinity could provide a monthly Bible Study program for their residents. During the last 18 months, this monthly volunteer effort at Arden Courts has pushed and challenged me in ways I never expected. It is, however, an incredible opportunity and I have been blessed by those residents in ways impossible to describe.

Finally, well before my formal journey to ordination, I received an award from the rector and members of our Idaho congregation as "Agitator of the Year". Although this was intended as a sort of joke at the time because of my constant challenges to members of the congregation to take action or participate in an event, I have taken the award to heart. I hope that my actions and roles in this community demonstrate my commitment to live up to the standards set by Archdeacon Ormonde Plater and to carry out the charge given to me by the bishop at my ordination.

I will continue to function in the "world" of Baltimore County and within the Diocese of Maryland as a deacon in the Episcopal Church as long as I am physically able. I hurt with my brethren in their actual or philosophical trenches, with their marching, protesting, feeding, finding jobs; and in general continue to agitate for those unable to help themselves.

So, as you find opportunities in your own life to make changes, start new adventures, embark on new avenues of life, I encourage you to DO IT! Take the plunge, have fun and explore new ways to live the later parts of your life.