

Aging Well:

Theological Reflections on the Call and Retirement



by Jack L. Stotts

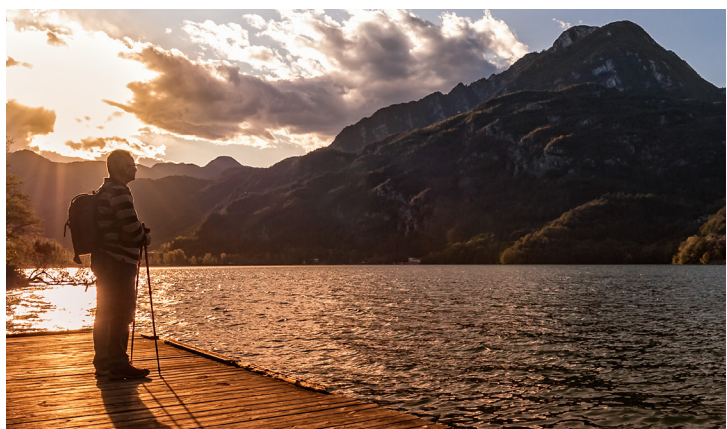
Dr. Jack L. Stotts retired from Austin Theological Seminary in 1996 where he served as president and professor of Christian ethics for eleven years. He had served twenty-two years on the faculty and administration of McCormick Theological Seminary.

IV. Retirement: Re-considering One's Call

One call in responding to God's calling comes in and through the structure called church. It is the call to become a Minister of Word and Sacrament. The temptation among many, both those who occupy or have occupied ecclesiastical calls and also among those who are "ordinary" members of the church, is to collapse calling into call when it comes to the ministerial offices of the church. Yet what excited or gripped those of us who occupy or occupied those positions was not initially the call to a particular role, to a professional call, but to participate in God's work in and through both church and world. To say yes to the ecclesiastical call was subordinate to saying yes to God's calling, the calling to give thanks for God's reuniting in Jesus Christ of the separated, including ourselves, and the privilege and responsibility of participating in that calling.

Calling and Ecclesiastical Call

However, we and others so often invest our ecclesiastical call with such meaning, importance and commitment that we equate calling and ecclesiastical call. We make the penultimate ultimate. This is not what we would say or want to say, but it is what our behavior often reveals. It is, of course not just clergy who make that unhappy identification. It is rampant as a temptation among all the professions. When that occurs, the subordinate or secondary call becomes what defines us, gives our lives meaning and standing, identity and community.



But when calling and calls are understood as one, when it comes to retirement, we descend into a state of anomie, a sense of displacement, of loss of standing, of meaning. Slowly or quickly we acknowledge that we have over-depended on our filling a particular call as a source for identity and satisfaction. We can become disoriented because we have no settled place of authority

and power, with all the accompanying benefits, financial, social, emotional, and spiritual. When we retire we may have a title, but it is disconnected from the power and status generally associated with a call. Our lives may be deconstructed. If we are fortunate we may still have a title as a last remnant of official identity. So we become, for example, a president emeritus of a seminary, which gives us something we can put on our "business card." But we have no business, as such. And when we are introduced it is often by referring to what we used to do. We become the person who used to do something worthwhile. I personally cannot count the number of times I have been introduced as the former president of Austin Seminary.

Our identity anxiety is closely aligned to community anxiety. Our work companions--staff, colleagues, church members, students, etc.--have been in large part our community. Now they are gone, with only the memory lingering on. That memory can be, though it need not be, a polluted memory of remorse and regret. That

is an unfortunate way of holding on to the past, and specifically to the last remnants of a particular kind of a call. It may also be symptomatic of our hunger for identity and community. So we are called to redefine ourselves, to listen and to look for how God is calling us now through all the potential new calls, what we are to do, where we are to do it, who we are and what are

the locations for a call or calls that are being sounded all around us.

Identity and community are, of course, two sides of the same coin. The malaise and depression that often accompany retirement may be just as difficult for other members of one's family as it is for the retiree.

V. Retirement and the Call



What Constitutes a Good Retirement?

What is our calling when there is no call? What constitutes this magical world of a “good” retirement? For not every retirement is a good retirement, any more than a particular call to serve a congregation can or will be inevitably and necessarily a “good call.”

A Context for Selfhood

Retirement is not a condition of our selfhood; it is a context for our selfhood. We must adapt, even as we have adapted to new contexts when we have moved from one physical location to another. The late Dr. Joseph Haroutunian, professor of theology at McCormick Seminary and later at the University of Chicago, dropped this pearl in class one day: “Our bodies precede our spirits and our spirits must catch up with our bodies,” referring to those who move geographically from one place to another. We find ourselves having to grow into a new culture as well as into a new house. Those of us who have moved many times can agree that it takes our emotions and our spirits longer to feel at home than it does our bodies.

In retirement our spirits follow our bodies as we enter into a new context. God is still calling us. What we have to do is to discern those calls and accord them different measures of importance and significance. However we do so, we retain the calling as what is central for our own integrity. As we put down one call, we pick up another or others. Retirement as a context, not a condition, reminds us that we will not be defined by our age or our setting in life.

Our call is to respond to the ultimate calling of God, but now in a different context. There will not be, nor should there be, the expectation that we will be altogether different people with altogether different calls. What there will be is a change of priority or emphasis with some characteristics that endure.

“
Our bodies precede our spirits and our spirits must catch up with our bodies
”

No Retirement from Church —

There is no retiring from the church. What there is is finding other ways of exercising that call: interim pastor, parish associate, stated supply, teaching church school, worshipping always, serving on presbytery committees, being volunteers in mission, and by being a participant as an “honorary layperson” in the ongoing life of a congregation—all these and more are ways by which we respond to the enduring calling by God through the church. A good retirement includes some ongoing relationship with a local church. That is, not surprisingly, a very difficult task for pastors and for spouses, who are used to a leadership position.

From Paid to Volunteer

We move from being paid to being a volunteer. Freedom, that characteristic of God’s being and doing, is a part of retirement. To be free is to be released from certain constraints and restraints inevitably associated with a community of faith, as with any person who gives leadership to any organization. But assuming that we have retirement incomes that allow us choices in such areas as housing, geographic location, etc., there are prospects of options not previously available. “I got my week-ends back,” one retired pastor exclaimed. This freedom will always be limited. But the emphasis is on this freedom as being freed from the clutches of institutional demands and requirements placed on ministers, or to which we allow ourselves to yield. One has the freedom to act with a greater range of opportunities, with a wider latitude in deciding. The criterion shifts from, “Is it good for the institution to do this?” to “Is this something that I really would enjoy doing?”

An example of a new venue where gifts and talents are applied to a new situation came to me last spring. Out of the blue I received an invitation to be the keynote speaker at the annual Texas Cattle Feeders Association. They wanted to hear something about ethics and how it applied to them. Not having any idea what I would say to about 500 cattle feeders, I said yes to the invitation. I would never have done that prior to retirement. But I took the invitation as an occasion to see if I could relate a Christian ethic to a religiously diverse group, including even those who at least professed no religious beliefs. It was a call not only out of the blue, but to a strange world where I was to talk about values in a non-religious environment. It was not my usual turf. But I had a lot of fun both preparing my remarks and in meeting with this group of cattle feeders. And I could astound them by asking them that in lieu of an honorarium they make a donation to the Austin area food bank. But the point is that I could use my gifts and talents in a very different arena than was for me usual. It must have gone all right because a professor of agriculture at Texas A&M came to the podium afterwards and asked if I would do a seminar for U.S. Department of Agriculture agents who were responsible for grading wool. I foolishly said yes but had an equally satisfying time. I discovered that I could indeed use some of my talents in unlikely settings. I had the time and energy to launch out into uncharted waters, at least for me uncharted.

Further, I have freedom to volunteer to work with my wife in filling orders at a local food bank and making sandwiches for the homeless. Instead of the hungry and the homeless being an abstraction that I could and did speak about, they became real people.

The Jesuit activist Daniel Berrigan wrote:



“When I hear bread breaking, I see something else; it seems to me as though God never meant us to do anything else. So beautiful a sound; the crust breaks up like manna and falls all over everything and then we eat; bread gets inside humans. It turns into what the experts call “formal glory of God,” but don’t let that worry you. Sometime in your life, hope that you might see one starved man, the look on his face when the bread finally arrives. Hope you might have baked it or bought it—or even kneaded it yourself. For that look on his face, for your hands meeting his across a piece of bread, you might be willing to lose a lot or suffer a lot—or die a little, even. “Formal glory?,” well yes. Maybe what we’re trying to understand is what they’re trying to say, who knows? I don’t think they understand—or every theologian would be working part time in a bread line. Who knows who might greet him there or how his words might change afterward—like stones into bread?”

The freedom to do what I had talked about and urged people to undertake became more real. In retirement we are free to venture into practices untried and even avoided, unable to claim “too busy.” I know a retired man who was a vice president for personnel of a large and prestigious corporation who now works in job placement with those unable to find employment. In retirement he is free to do what he chooses to do. A good retirement includes the gift of responsible freedom.

Enjoying God Forever

We move from glorifying God to enjoying God forever, from usefulness to enjoyment. Such a move represents technically a shift from an instrumental measure of our lives to the intrinsic measure, or from a focus on achievement to a focus on delight and beauty. We have been told to stop and smell the flowers, but found little occasion to do so. Now we can. And that can be a gift that need not be measured by its contribution to some particular goal.

We are production-oriented as a society and as a church. No matter what size the church, the pastor measures him- or herself, as do his colleagues and parishioners, by whether a person has achieved something or other. In retirement the temptation to fall into quantitative measurements recedes but never departs from our spirits. The instrumentalist view of the self shouldn't and doesn't drop away. We are to seek to glorify God in all that we do. But now there are prospects for a fuller life than we have allowed ourselves to entertain as a possibility. Now I can read books without the instrumentalist scale of testing them by whether the harvest of sermon illustrations or class room applications warranted the expenditure of so much time. Now I can take delight in enjoying a novel, in writing a poem, and not feel so guilty when there on my desk sits the latest theological study on a particular issue.



Filling Our Time

Retirement offers an opportunity to fill our time, not think we are wasting it, in taking delight. We can give attention to different sides of ourselves that have been perhaps malnourished. Now I can spend more time with children and grandchildren. Friendships may be seen as worthy in themselves and to be cultivated. There is time with one's spouse to explore what we have put on hold. Now we can ask ourselves, “What do we enjoy doing?” instead of, “What do I have to do to accomplish this goal?”

The instrumentalist view doesn't disappear. At times its ruthlessness seizes our souls. But in a “good retirement” it is no longer defining of my worth or value. We can honestly say to the person who says to us, “I can't do anybody any good anymore. I need to die and get out of the way.” “No. You are worthy of affirmation as a human being, no matter your condition. For the self is of intrinsic worth.”

This characteristic that rejects the imperialism of the

- instrumentalist view of life can be seen as we struggle with
- how to respond to the inevitable question, “What are you
- doing now that you have retired?” “I am enjoying myself and
- my family.” That can sound like and can be self-indulgent.
- But it may be a recovery of values earlier submerged or
- relegated to the sideline of the real game of usefulness.
- A proper proportionality of activities and sources of
- satisfaction can be affirmed. A good retirement includes the
- enjoyment of God, our neighbors and the world around us.

Life at Leisure

A good retirement is a life at leisure. Michael Welzer, in *Spheres of Justice*, writes: “for most people, leisure is simply the opposite of work; idleness its essence. ... But there is an alternative understanding of leisure. ... Free time is not only vacant time; it is also time at one’s command. That lovely phrase ‘one’s own sweet time’ doesn’t always mean that one has nothing to do, but rather that there is nothing that one has to do” (p. 185). By “has to do” I take it that leisure time is time open to what we decide belongs there. That doesn’t mean jettisoning our earlier commitments and values. It does mean that the proportionality of values can and should shift. We can fill our time with enjoying what we have passed by in our too busy engagements.

To be at leisure does not mean to abandon the values we have espoused previously. It is to put them in different forms. The criteria given by the Lordship of Christ continues, including concern for the world around us. We are not recipients of any call to self-indulgence. We continue to ask whether at retirement we continue to engage in practices that are expressive of the comprehensive love of God.

