

## **Wading In: A Retirement Sermon**

By Patty Friesen (Feb. 2/25)

There is a story from the Jewish Midrash - which is like a commentary to the Old Testament in which there is the story of Moses getting to the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army on the heels of the Hebrews and lifting up his staff to part the sea but the sea did not part. Everyone panicked and no one knew what to do until a Hebrew named Nachshon simply walked into the Red Sea - first up to his ankles, then waist and then shoulders. After all what was there to lose drowning since Pharaoh's army would slaughter them anyway but when Nachshon got up to his nostrils, the Sea parted. The point is sometimes miracles only happen when you jump in. I like this story because it is an ode to action, experimentation and optimism. (A.J.Jacobs, The Good Book, A. Blauner, p. 71)

I think Nachshon wading in, not out of bravery but out of having no other option, typifies my life and career in ministry. Growing up conservative Mennonite, I was taught women couldn't be ministers and our purpose was only to be wives and mothers and possibly teachers and nurses. I didn't know what I wanted to do in life but I knew I wasn't ready to be a wife and mother, so I stepped into the Red Sea and went to Hesston College in Hesston Kansas where I took what I loved - Bible classes. It was at Hesston College that Professor Duane Yoder said I should become a minister so I waded up to my ankles and went into Voluntary Service and youth ministry in Portland, Oregon where I was ordained and went to seminary and married Patrick and waded in deeper and deeper into a 2S LGBTQ+ welcoming congregation in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

99% of my career has been spent feeling like I was in not only up to my nostrils but over my head with dealing with church conflicts, mental health and marriage struggles, and my own struggles with doubt and ill parents. Just when I had thought I had seen everything in ministry, something new would pop-up like a young adult whom I had baptized in Minneapolis as a teenager, then wanting to be “un-baptized” in college. There has never been a dull moment in ministry and I’m deeply grateful for that. I have always wanted to get up and go to work and discover what new drama awaited. And despite all the drama, working for the church has been an anchoring force in my life. Sunday after Sunday we sang the same hymns and steadfastly proclaimed that God was with us whatever we were going through. I still believe that.

Retirement is another wading into the unknown. I determined that if my retirement were to be critiqued, it would be for being too soon rather than too late. "Its better people ask, 'Why did she retire so soon?' than 'Why didn't she retire sooner?!" Colleagues ask "How do you know when you're done ministry?" Some famous pastor said, "You're done when you can lay it on the altar - when you can lay your years of ministry on the altar before God as a baton to be received by succeeding generations, you can retire." What dawned on me is that ministry is not a marathon, but a relay race. I received the baton from those before me - Jake Pauls, Walter Franz, Bill and Helen Kruger, Menno Epp, Gordon Janzen, Gordon Allaby. My calling is to run my leg of the race 2014-2025 and make a clean pass of the baton to younger ministers like Zachary Stefaniuk and my mentee Lisi Schrottner at Wildwood and Luke and whomever takes over my office. My challenge now is to finish well and make a smooth hand-off to everyone without proroguing Parliament!

Retirement guru Dr. Riley Moynes says in North American we are in a retirement tsunami and many of us are washed on shore and we feel like fish out of water. He also says retirement is like marriage – you never really know what it's like until you do it. Just as your marriage will evolve over the years, so too will your retirement. The honeymoon is great, but it doesn't last forever. Working through the challenges that surface is one of the fun parts of both marriage and retirement. No retirement (or marriage) is perfect, but there's a lot you can do to make it the best experience possible. Learn to experiment, learn to follow your curiosity, and learn to maintain a positive attitude. If there's one piece of advice I'd give to help you deal with the changes that occur throughout your retirement, it is to embrace, nurture, listen to, and follow your curiosity wherever it leads.

In the 4 phases of retirement: Phase 1 - the vacation and fun phase lasts for only about a year apparently and then in year 2/phase 2 - one feels the loss of identity and purpose, phase 3 is trial and error experimentation with how can I make my life meaningful again? How can I contribute? What new things can I try and allow myself to fail at? And phase 4 "What's the purpose here? What's my mission? How can I squeeze all the juice out of retirement? It's important that we find activities that are meaningful to us and that give us a sense of accomplishment. And that it almost always involves service to others."

I'm going to let the verbs of my life - the "ing" words lead my life for a while.

Ukulele Band at OMC 1 - I'll be *musicing*. In many ways I have already been living into my retirement dreams of making more music this past year by joining the Bethany ukulele band. I've bought an accordion at the Warman Thrift Store so I want to

learn how to play that. I've always wanted to have seasons tickets to the symphony so I bought a 2 for 1 this year so I can take a friend. I want to fill my retirement with music.

FIM slide - 2- I'll be walking and e-biking and taking better care of my health through exercising. For starters - I've begun leading a Forever-in-Motion seniors exercise group at Riverbend Church on La Ronge Road on Monday mornings.

Book Slide - 3 - Reading - not just for sermons but for fun. I may read all those Amish romances I've been skipping these past 35 years. Nah - probably not. But I have some good detective novels on my wish list.

Bird slide - 4 - Watching - I'm going to be doing more watching - bird watching for starters. Then watching for God. Ironically in ministry - I've sometimes forgot to watch for God. And I'm going to give myself permission to binge-watch all my favourite British TV series without guilt.

5 - Road tripping - (funny slide of old ladies on tour). Patrick and I are leaving for Victoria this week to see our favourite choir Voce 8 singing at Christ Cathedral. Then I'm planning a road trip to Schmeckfest in Freeman, South Dakota trip with some girlfriends in April and an across US train trip at some point.

I may be retiring from ministry but I don't feel washed up yet. "How can I be a good steward of the gifts and graces, knowledge, experiences, and relationships with which I've been blessed these past 35 years and still do some good with it?" Someone said, "You can't get out of ministry. It's like getting unbaptized. It doesn't work." We are called to be lifelong "stewards of God's mysteries," ever discerning new outlets for the verbs God planted in our souls so we may partner with the risen Christ in what the rabbis call tikkun olam – the repair of the world.

Retirement calls us all to volunteer work that transcends previous work callings. We're called to serve all creation with intelligence, energy, imagination, and love. When we do that, the result is meaning, purpose, and joy. When we do it for the duration of our lives, we will finish well and pass the baton to succeeding generations with confidence and pleasure. We will be able to lay our retirements and lives on the altar with gratitude, and peace. (Living Out the Verbs of Our Lives: Transitioning into Retirement by David. A. Shirey).

I will close with an adapted blessing for us wading into this time of change from Kate Bowler. Blessed are you, dear ones, when things are changing. Everything is different now, your body, your age, your relationships, your job, your faith. Things have changed and it would be silly to imagine you haven't changed with them. You are not who you once were. Bless that old self who made you who you were back in the day, all the mistakes and heartbreak and naiveté and courage. And blessed are who you are now, you who aren't pretending things are the same, who continue to grow and stretch and show up to your life as it really is: wholehearted, vulnerable, maybe a little afraid. So blessed are we, the changed. Let us wade in. Amen.