
Vocation

Last week I attended a conference to which pastors who were in their third part of their ministry were invited. There were about twelve of us in attendance, and we talked at length about what it means to retire and what that looks like for a pastor. One of the things that most pastors face that is different from the average retiree is the expectation that the pastor will not continue to be a member in his last church beyond retirement. Too many times, it has been discovered, the retired pastor interferes in the work of the next pastor, causing friction and discord. So, when a pastor retires, he is expected to move away from his last congregation, finding a new community or returning to an old one. Unlike pastors, most people, when they retire, continue to live in the same community after retirement, and although their lives can be drastically different, they experience a lot of continuity as well. The conference focused on those who are in the last third of their ministry, helping us understand how we can prepare for this last and often difficult transition. I found it to be helpful even though I am at least a decade from retirement (hopefully).

In the course of the conversation, it became evident that not all cultures understand the concept of retirement. One of the pastors in attendance has his roots in Colombia, and he works with Christian Reformed Latino pastors in the southern United States. Latino pastors normally don't speak of retirement; they tend to work until they are no longer able, some dying in the pulpit, figuratively speaking. His comments led to a discussion about the arbitrariness of retirement. Most of us think of 65 as being the retirement age, although people my age won't get their pension until 66, but the age of 65 is quite arbitrary. Another of those in attendance continues in ministry at the age of 67, and he does not foresee that he will be ending his ministry soon. Although he finds that he does not have the stamina he used to have, he still is invigorated by his work.

As the conversation progressed, the word, vocation, was thrown around. Vocation (coming from the same root as "vocal") refers to our calling, and, according to the dictionary, is often considered to be a divine calling. In some circles, vocation is reserved for those who work in religious settings such as churches and monasteries, but Reformed people understand that everyone has a vocation, a calling from God. One's vocation can be in agriculture or education, carpentry or nursing. God places a call on our lives, and we respond to that call by faithfully engaging in the kind of work that best enables us to fulfill that call.

A vocation is different from a job or even a career. A career is a particular way of fulfilling our vocation. For the most productive years of our lives (20-65+), we tend to respond to God's calling by having a career. We may retire from our career, but that does not mean that our vocation ceases. The question is this: how do we continue to full our vocation (God's calling) when we no longer have a career? This was the question that was posed to us as pastors. How do we continue to answer God's call (our vocation) when we no longer have a church in which we pastor? For the Latino pastors, because their careers do not end, this is not a hard answer. For a variety of reasons (often financial but also very much cultural), they fulfill their vocation by continuing to do exactly what they had been doing for the rest of their lives. For a North American pastor, however, the question becomes more problematic: how do we fulfill our vocations

without being called by a church? The answer is not easy to discover, and it will vary from person to person, depending on health, circumstance and opportunity.

One of the pastors who was leading the conference and who retired just a year ago, shared some helpful insights. She said that when she first retired, she took a sabbatical, pausing from serving actively to reflect on God's blessings throughout her career. She talked of her time serving in a church and then teaching in a couple of Christian universities. She needed the time to reflect so that she could sense God's calling as she moved forward to new opportunities. She confessed that she still was not entirely clear how she would fulfill God's calling, but things were starting to gel a little. She suspects that in the next couple of months she will become clear about how she can fulfill God's call on her life, and she is certain that that call will also include ample time to spend with her grandchildren.

We often focus on helping young people understand their vocation, their calling, and we also want to help them seek a career that will help them fulfill their vocation. What we do far less is to help those who are coming to the end of their careers continue to fulfill their callings. In the most extreme cases, a retiree, who can afford it, shirks any notion of vocation and spends his/her life in self-gratifying activities, playing pickleball in the morning and golfing in the afternoon. It's rather hard to understand how such a person is answering God's call. (Note, that someone who no longer has a career has more time to engage in these activities, and that can be a blessing. The problem occurs when that is all that they are doing.) God's call, our vocation, remains intact even when we do not need to earn money by engaging in a career, and we should not neglect that calling. Perhaps it is as great (or greater) a challenge to discover how someone who no longer works in a career can discover how to answer God's call in other ways as it is to determine what vocation God may have for us when we are young. To discover that might take a great deal of creative thinking.

What did I gain from the conference? I learned that I need to seek God's leading so that as I work through the last third (probably last quarter) I can continue in my vocation beyond my retirement date. As God's call remains, I trust that I will find a way to answer that call, trusting that whatever it looks like, God will use me for his kingdom and his glory. At every age of life it is good to consider what our vocation is, but especially in times of transition the question becomes more pertinent. May we all know God's call on our lives and seek to answer that call no matter what age we may be.

Pastor Gary