

# We don't age out

## Faithfulness in retirement

Wes Goertzen

I was twenty-five years old when Quaker peace activist Tom Fox was killed in Iraq while serving with Christian Peacemakers Teams (CPT).<sup>1</sup> At the

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time I was doing Christian service in El Alto, Bolivia. We raised our own and our field's support and lived on little among people who lived on much less. We also served, a bit sporadically, at the El Alto Missionaries of Charity home, a home for people with high needs—the impoverished elderly and people living with disabilities. At some point, our US office started encouraging us US staff to save for retirement. It was the first time I had thought about retirement. To be

honest, it sounded inconsistent with following Jesus in our setting. So the joke became that we had two options for retirement: living at Missionaries of Charity or joining CPT.

It was a grim joke, but hard work in hard places takes humor in grim directions.

As someone seeking to live faithfully to the witness and teaching of Jesus Christ, I saw retirement as either serving until I was indistinguishable from those I served (Missionaries of Charity) or martyrdom. There would be no expensive assisted-living or nursing home for me. Such was my thinking as a twenty-five-year-old serving the population of the Calle Carasco red light district.

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1 See "Tom Fox: Moving towards the Light," CPT, <https://cpt.org/tom-fox-moving-towards-light>; "Body of Abducted U.S. Peace Activist Identified," NPR, March 11, 2006, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5257932>. Tom Fox was only fifty-four when he died. From my vantage point, he lived a very normal life, and at an older age he had made a scary and courageous career change when he could have been enjoying himself.

The point of this reflection is simple: we don't age out of God's kingdom or the ongoing transformation that a life with Jesus entails. I fear that what is often heard both inside and outside the Christian community is that there comes a point when we choose (or our society chooses for us) that we have done enough and can coast (or must make way). I have

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heard this message and succumbed to its fantasy personally on occasion. But neither entitlement nor obsolescence characterize faithful retirement.

My grandpa retired early, in his fifties, when interest rates were sky high in the late 1970s. Bank CDs were paying

double digits. (My emergency fund CD pays 1 percent today.) It was a rough time for farmers just starting out. Many lost their farms. As the story goes, pretty much out of the blue, my grandpa laid the proposition to my dad and his brother: "Buy me out [or I'll sell the farm to someone else]. You have the weekend to decide." My uncle quit school and came home to make it work.

My grandparents wintered in McAllen, Texas. I didn't have the definitive (and judgmental) word for it at the time, but it seemed selfish. It was inconvenient for a child who likes the indulgence of grandparents: playing with grandpa's wood carvings, devouring grandma's baking, and making noise on their fancy electric organ. We still sampled the candy dish and admired his woodworking when we checked in on the cold house through the winter. Nothing of my grandparents' retirement made any reference to the faith they professed in Jesus—not to me as a kid.

Contemporary practices and means for retirement are barely a century old in the West. The median length of retirement must be higher than it has ever been in human history, yet the concept is not new. Roman soldiers who survived their campaigns could look forward to decent retirement pensions and sometimes land and villas. The Old Testament idea of sitting under one's own vine and fig tree (Micah 4:4; 1 Kings 4:25; Zech. 3:10) offers a vision in which retirement sounds reasonable, though the context in these passages has more to do with freedom from oppression. Resting contentedly in the shade of one's own planting is both just reward and faithful hope.

The word *retirement* comes from Old French, meaning “act of retreating, act of falling back,” or “act of withdrawing into seclusion.”<sup>2</sup> I find the movement at the heart of the word useful. It causes us to ask questions like these: What do we retire *from*? What do we retire *to*? How might faithfulness to Jesus and his way bear on our choices in retirement? What pitfalls and tweaks in our thinking or practice are necessary to follow Jesus through retirement? I ask these questions not only for my congregants—who, admittedly, mostly do not consult me about their retirement plans—but also for myself. How do I prepare? Should I be preparing?

In the congregation where I pastor, almost 80 percent of our members—and about 50 percent of regular attendees—are people over sixty. That is enough that we probably need a more clearly articulated set of assumptions or expectations for and from this life stage. The last third of life seems to me to be one where we need help renewing or pursuing a new vocation. Knowing Jesus, recognizing and submitting to his lordship, and living in his kingdom and his way is still the meaning of life for retirees. The life of faith and one's responsibilities as a kingdom citizen may

look differently at sixty-five or eighty-five than it did at seven or thirty-seven, but one simply does not age out of the kingdom of heaven as one does from an occupation.

Now at forty, I save monthly from my paycheck for retirement. Missionaries of Charity is not my nursing home of choice; they have more deserving people to care for. But I miss the beautiful, smelly chaos of that place. And their fresh buns would win the approval

of the pickiest Mennonite bun connoisseur. My children are many years from graduation, but our house is about paid off, and so at times I again wonder about retirement and the freedom it offers—both my retirement and that of my congregants. Sometimes in conversation with elders, Jesus seems less human, though not necessarily less close. This makes me wonder: Does Jesus become someone different to us later in life? Does it get

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<sup>2</sup> See “retirement” at the Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/retirement>.

harder to relate to Jesus when one has lived two or three times as long as he did while on the earth? I certainly hope not.

The cherry tree my daughters and I planted seems to have chosen a bush habit, so I probably won't be lounging under my own shade trees in my old age. But, again, I wonder: Will I be content spoon carving or chair making in silence and solitude under the trees or retreating to the bush? Does retirement simply mean *me time* after so much *them time*? Or will the meantime shift my wants beyond myself? Will that be faithful? Practically, does climate change and community that counts on our presence preclude my *ability* to travel south to skip Manitoba winters? When is it my turn to step back and let others lead and when will it be my responsibility as elder to come alongside, affirm, warn, or tell a good tale of success or failure in the face of adversity? How do I pursue a living relationship with Jesus when the world becomes strange, and he asks me to be transformed and renewed? Will I befriend the bewilderingly strange youth? Can I find a way to enjoy gathered worship when the noise of children makes it impossible for me to hear? When my spiritual siblings suggest that significant pieces of my life's work have worked against the grain of God's script, how will I respond? Will I still have a seat at the table? These are my questions because they are questions not yet answered definitively by my elders.

Even at twenty-five, my CPT retirement plan wasn't just flippant or youthful exuberance. It was an immature attempt to square capitalism's retirement promises with the life and calling of Jesus, to take Jesus's teachings about cross bearing seriously, to see even in the face of great evil the radical witness to God's in-breaking light and life as a real, faithful, and practical option in the smorgasbord of retirement choices. Maybe it is. Maybe I will. God willing.

### **About the author**

Wes Goertzen is pastor in rural Manitoba, husband, and father to daughters. They just finished the last of the Lord of the Rings series, and between harvest and camping, he hopes to build a decent stick chair while on sabbatical.