

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

Ever since I was a teenager I have had a sense that God has had a hand in each new direction I have taken, each change of post, each key step in my life. Until now.

I was fifteen when I first had a feeling, and a rather embarrassed feeling, that I should think about the possibility of being ordained. The feeling came to me suddenly, and out of the blue. But learning to pay attention to that hunch, and hunches ever since, has meant I have had this sense of God's hand in my life.

That has come in a variety of forms, and seems always to have involved waiting, sometimes a long wait, testing my patience and my trust. Steps I thought I would like to make have not turned out, and then others have appeared that I would never have dreamed of.

Those moves have taken me across the Atlantic to America twice, once to study for a year, and once to work for more than ten years. And those moves have brought me wonderfully to Suffolk, now nearly ten years ago.

Sometimes I have not paid attention to the nudges and prods that seem to come from God, and headed off in what I then came to realise was the wrong direction. But even then, my experience is that God rescues the situation, one way or another, and gets me back on track.

I say all this without a sense that my life is all planned and I just have to follow the route. It is more that at each step I am guided to what might be the best way forward and when I follow I feel a sense of "rightness" about it. But I have said that has been the case "until now."

My impending retirement has felt different, and challenging in unfamiliar ways.

Until very recently, I had felt little sense of God's hand, God's guidance, and was bewildered about what will happen next, and where my identity and purpose will come from. It has been impossible for me to imagine life without a clear purpose, that I am serving God and the church.

We speak about vocation, and being "called" by God. I have not heard that call to retirement.

Three years ago my anxiety about this was expressed in wondering where on earth my wife and I would live. Feverish searches on Rightmove compounded the feeling, and wondering just where we would end up – my job, serving in Suffolk, means we cannot under Church guidelines retire to Suffolk where a new bishop will be appointed. That fear – and I thank God - was allayed when my wife became a vicar in Cambridge, so I will move into her vicarage, and we will live there for the five years or so until she retires. So we still need to find somewhere, but the pressure is off, and that is an immense relief.

But still there is the question of meaning and purpose, of "calling," beyond retirement. What will I do? How will I be useful?

With the call to ordination, as with the call to many roles and occupations, comes not just a gift of purpose, but also a gift of identity. Who I am is bound up with my role, my calling, and how that is expressed in the day to day life of being a parish priest, a Cambridge college principal, and now a bishop. So when I let go of this, who will I be?

And I know I am not alone with this question – it is a question many people face when they reach retirement, after decades in an occupation that has given them purpose, joy and identity.

It is just very recently – in the last couple of months – that I have begun to have a sense of ease, of peace, about the approaching change. And this seems to go back to my lifetime experience of needing to wait, to be patient. The God who has appeared absent in this next step, has started to make appearances that point me to the future.

It has a lot to do with letting go. Early in the summer it was as if a switch had flipped, and I could start to let go of my role. It was not up to me, and the God who has always guided me is inviting me to start to lay the responsibilities down. And with that I began to gain a sense of what the future was for.

First, my calling is to support and care for my wife, who has supported me all these years. I can look after her and support her in the challenging role with which she has been entrusted, as vicar of the University Church in Cambridge.

And I can read, and study, and think, with space that has not been there for me for a long time. That suddenly feels like a huge gift. And, strangely, with that space and time, I have a sense that I at last might actually “be” a bishop, rather than focus on all the “doing” of a bishop’s role. That is an odd thought, but it too contains the glimmer of a gift.

The God who has always guided me is still doing that. I just have to be patient, and I have to trust.