



An Address by Prof. Donald G. Davis to the Librarians' Christian Fellowship Conference "Beyond Librarianship" held on Saturday 20 April 2013 in the Eadon Hall, Methodist Central Hall, Warwick Lane, Coventry.

When I meet friends and colleagues, I can predict with a great deal of certainty that they will ask one of two questions: "*How are you doing (spending your time) in retirement?*" or, "*What are you working on now?*" The first, a question usually asked by the general public, suggests a broad concern or curiosity about how one who was fully engaged in a variety of productive endeavors is continuing or changing his behaviour. The second, usually asked by an academic colleague, suggests that research and writing should be the norm for scholars to the end of life. The first question tries to discover an attitude or a perspective one may have about living life after formally retiring from a career ladder job. The second assumes productivity of a special academic nature. I have to confess that I usually try to answer the first question, no matter which one is asked, though I can give what may sound as a feeble answer to the second question. The dilemma of responding to these two queries has made me reflect on the nature of retirement—and, in particular, on my own retirement from a successful career in my field and a variety of interests that complements it but concerned about using my talents for God's glory. Thus, retirement: What good is it? And for what? And for whom?

The world likely divides into those who look forward to enjoying retirement and those who do not. Reasons will vary for each response according to social and economic expectations, physical and mental health, and vocational and spiritual vision. Retirement is certainly a comparatively recent option for many reasons that social thinkers have reminded us. In the 1880's in Germany and later elsewhere, progressive social states began to support care of the aged. Until the later nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, when labour unions and governments embraced the concept, most people simply worked until they could do so no longer. Some believe that our modern system of retirement, old-age pensioners, social security recipients, etc. was (according to R.C. Sproul) "*conjured up by somebody who wanted to make room for other people to get a job.*" Especially during the Great Depression of the 1930's, this idea seemed attractive. However and for

whatever reasons, we are now caught up in the system that prevails in most of the progressive democracies.

But having said that and understanding the socio-economic pattern, let us remember also that retirement is not really a biblical concept. Levites who are Temple priests were to retire at fifty, mentor younger priests, or go back to their farms, according to Leviticus 8:25. The relatively short working life of a Levite, combined with life expectancy at that time, meant that family and clan would provide what else was needed. But the Bible does talk about preparing for future years, caring for one's family, being able to share with others in need, etc.—a point not missed, at least in the USA, by Christian estate planners and financial advisors. We'll have to leave that topic there for today. A lot more could be said.

The major issue with “retirement” in progressive countries is the none too subtle contrast between the world's common conception and the faithful Christian's understanding. Is it, and should it be, a time of leisure, pleasure, and relaxation—or a time of more time and opportunity to use one's gifts for the glory of God and the benefit of others? This is a greater and more complex issue than many of us are willing to recognise. Following World War II, at least in America, the real estate developers, the dream marketers, and financial advisors began to sell the idea of retirement as a worthy, if not the most important, goal in one's life. As young adults, we are subject to many credible influences, opinions of friends and family, challenges of the workplace and church community, lures of advertising and wild dreams. However, in the end, it is *contentment*—having enough to live the life that pleases God—that is the priceless virtue that the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, support.

You see, we don't even realise how many times we have been tempted to succumb to the pressures that surround us. The slick marketing of consumer-oriented, creature comforts, total security, unbounded pleasure, etc. has been done very skillfully in the USA, and I suspect in the UK and elsewhere. It is all too easy to dream of doing, being, experiencing all those things that our society says characterises virtually all successful people. And who can possibly not want this? It is a matter of entitlement. Retirement can offer that avenue, escape, or excuse that can seem so natural, so expected—and so deserved.

Now I grant you, if one has life pretty well tied up in one's vocation, profession, public persona, then retirement is particularly difficult to contemplate with much joy. You may not be important enough to take that anticipated victory lap of appreciation. (Those outdated introduction cards do not go over very well.) In fact, many are reluctant to consider retirement because they have given little thought to what they would do with themselves.

They really cannot conceive of doing anything else beyond their current jobs. They may find the thought of changing longstanding routines painful. (And remember, spending more time with one's spouse is not always as idyllic as some would dream about!) The descriptive title under our name on our office door or institutional stationery means a lot to us, as does the business card or homepage with my name on it. Some of us cannot bear to leave that behind or even accept significant modification. But it can be done. We just don't have much of another fulfilling life beyond the workplace. But the time will come when we will have to discover one, or we will simply fade away.

It is my belief that in retirement, one's enjoyable avocations and unrequited passions become new, modified, or expanded vocations and causes. If you have not discovered or maintained a life beyond the workplace—the library, the classroom, the office, etc.—then you will have little incentive to accept retirement gracefully and productively. So, it is not too early to find those activities and ministries that give you pleasure before retirement, so that you can develop them later. (Someone has said that God's will is often found where the world's needs and one's gifts and abilities coincide.) Where one can serve with joy and pleasure takes some time to discover, so all the more reason to get started! Persons who are wholly and single mindedly committed to their job may get the job done, but they are not preparing themselves for later years. They may receive the gold star for utter commitment from some, but they are not necessarily heroes to me.

So, as the aging process creeps or gallops along, as the realism of retirement sets in, as the counsel with family and friends goes on, and on—remember the new, creative ministries that await. We should at least be as creative about how to live our lives productively in retirement as we did when we were working full time. With an adequate income and minimal creature necessities assured, you are now free to do what you were meant to do in a new way. Now you can devote more and flexible time, and maybe even more energy, to those endeavours that give you pleasure and serve God's purpose in the world—to redeem it and its people to give the Almighty praise. For many of us, our retirement will indeed reflect the kind of gifts that we brought to the library and information profession and the knowledge and skills that we developed—not the worst contribution one could make! But let's face it. Few of our lives will turn out to be exactly what we expected, despite all the counseling and self-improvement programmes we absorb. Some of our lives may change dramatically. Think of it as being a twenty-something again with your life ahead of you. Only now, you know yourself better than you did then. You know what your gifts and limitations are. And you also know that you may have a few good years left!

To be sure, take some time off, enjoy some trips and holidays, sample some of those activities that give you pleasure and benefit others. And don't

hesitate to slow down as needed, but to stay engaged with others in supporting communities of spiritual nurture and avenues for outreach. Networks developed over a lifetime are still valuable connections for retirement; so we should seek to nurture our colleagues. Some of us, instead of expanding our involvement with groups of various kinds, will need to be willing, without regret, to modify our commitments. In the end, we will want to find opportunities where we can faithfully minister the grace of God to others for their benefit, while receiving that same grace to sustain ourselves.

Your programme planners suggested that I close with some autobiographical reflections, so let me do that, hoping that this won't bore you this afternoon before tea time.

Two weeks before World War II began in Europe, I was born thirty miles from where I now live in Austin, Texas. When I was two and a half, my family moved to southern California, where I grew up and attended college. My father was a Baptist pastor all his life and often supplemented his income with part time jobs. My mother was what is now called "*a stay at home mom*" who ultimately bore five children of which I am the eldest. Because of his chaplaincy in the War, the GI Bill for education, and a small legacy my mother received, we spent one and a half years in Edinburgh (1948-1949) as he pursued his doctorate in church history, one of the first in that wave of Americans to do so. This was a formative period in my life. Skipping my childhood and adolescence—which you would find truly fascinating, I'm sure—I graduated from UCLA with a degree in history. Then followed rapidly a M.A. in history, the M.L.S. in librarianship from *University of California, Berkeley*, and four years at the state university in Fresno, California, where I was reference librarian and head of Special Collections. From 1968 to 1971, I was a doctoral student at the *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*. There I met my late wife Avis, also a graduate student there, and our first daughter was born; a son and another daughter came along after we moved to Austin. They are now scattered from Baltimore to Grand Junction CO, with the nearest in Fort Worth. During 1980-1981, the family enjoyed a year in Britain when I was an exchange lecturer in Birmingham library school and affiliated with this group.

My career at the University of Texas spanned thirty-five years as I moved up through the academic ranks. The usual spheres of teaching, research, and service suited me well as I pursued my passionate interests: primarily book and library history, but also reference work and bibliography, and, collection development and management. Probably three thousand or so students passed through my classes, each of whom heard my brief faith journey story and each was invited to our home for dinner or dessert, and caught a glimpse of what practicing Christians were like. I was blessed to receive several noteworthy recognition awards, to produce a score of books, including

reference works, bibliographies, a monograph, collected essays, and conference proceedings—in addition to numerous articles and book reviews. In addition to dozens of professional trips abroad and lecturing in ten foreign countries, my most noteworthy opportunity and joy was to edit the *Journal of Library History* which became *Libraries & Culture*, published by *University of Texas Press* from 1976 to 2006, perhaps the high point of its nearly fifty-year history. This position brought together my academic interests, my editorial and organisational skill, and my excitement about networking with editorial board members, potential authors, reviewers, etc. I retired fully in 2006.

Why am I telling you all this? I feel a little like St. Paul in Philippians 3, when I say that in retirement much of the prestige and recognition I enjoyed has gone. Paul didn't say it was easy either, though it was rubbish compared to his life in Christ. However, he cared enough about it to remember and list his achievements, and I, too, savour those things that were meaningful to me. We can lay these things down as a sacrifice at the feet of Christ, as Paul did. Though I still enjoy reviewing books, writing essays, reading drafts of manuscripts, there is renewed joy of continuing work of Kingdom ministry. That previous life of integrating Christian witness and my professional pursuits is not wasted and has morphed into doing more of what I did as an avocational pursuit before. What I did in discretionary time then, I can do more intentionally now. And now that I am single again and in good health, my schedule is more flexible to follow the call. There are three primary ministry opportunities in my life at present. All of them have their origin in what I was and did already in the workplace or while I was employed full-time.

The first is a ministry to faculty members at universities in my part of Texas. Well before coming to Texas in 1971, I was convinced that we are not placed in positions of influence randomly, but are called to an appointment to be light and salt—and maybe a little hot sauce, as well. Thus, I was part of a group that became known as the *Christian Faculty Network* at the University. For thirty five years and on into retirement, I was an integral part of this small group that represented the principle that Christians should unite for fellowship and outreach in groups, wherever they are situated. I now itinerate in southwest Texas through Faculty Ministry of *InterVarsity Christian Fellowship* alongside a colleague from Faculty Commons of *Campus Crusade*, a similar organisation. We visit campuses in the Austin, Houston, and San Antonio regions—praying to challenge individuals, to stimulate a desire for visible groups, and to identify potential leaders. I've been able to write some challenging essays and Bible studies for these faculty and staff folk.

The second is as a lay pastor, certified by Mission Presbytery of the PC(USA) to preach in churches without a pastor or as a pulpit supply. I began this after graduating from a local seminary and completing an additional two-year course for laypersons. Since 2004 I have preached over a hundred times in

congregations of from less than ten to one hundred and fifty or so, mostly in central Texas. Playing the piano helps, as well. For two years I was commissioned to help a new church development in a city thirty miles away. I have drawn on my Bible study background, teaching experience, and social skills to help me in sharing God's Word with those who need to hear it. Meanwhile, there is a lot of study and prayer in the preparation that enriches in my own spiritual life.

Third, though previously a deacon and an elder in my local Presbyterian (Reformed) church, in retirement I have been able to spend more time caring for those in special need.

This has taken two forms. First, since I am not squeamish about bored, anxious, sick, and dying people, I have agreed to do hospital and hospice visitation on Sunday afternoons, when the regular pastors are tired out. I am excited to bring the Gospel of hope to these folk and their families. Sunday is a great time to meet families at their loved ones' bedside. My wife having died a year and half ago from recurring ovarian cancer, I can stay and comfort the dying and the living to the end. When visiting the sick and dying, I am doing Christ's work. Second, because of my own need and the people who are alone in my circle of acquaintances, I have reached out to men and women who are alone, especially through loss of a spouse through death or divorce—or both. I sometimes quote James 1:27 about true religion being “*to look after orphans and widows in their distress . . .*” which I take to be any who need special support and encouragement. My own journey of transforming grief to gratitude and guilt to grace has brought me many ways of expressing hope and cheer to others—and provided many of good times I could not have imagined.

So, for me there is a continuing of previous endeavors into retirement. Being single again as a widower, I need things to do that utilise the gifts and experience that I have. Since I thrive on relationships with others in community, life is seldom dull. And there is a lifetime of networking that ripples through much of my life yet. Thus, I need to carve out times during the week for reading and quiet times. There are new configurations in my life as I strive to give and receive God's grace wherever I am.

As I prepared these remarks in mid-March 2013, I received a message for a prominent Chinese library historian who is director of the *Sun-Yat-Sen (Zhong Shan) University Library* and senior professor in the information school located in Guang Zhou, People's Republic of China, where I have lectured on several occasions. We have spent much time together in segments over the years in China, Paris and the USA. He tells me that the recent book on the history of libraries, to which I wrote the introduction, is the subject of a panel discussion in which he is participating. He earnestly wants to know whether,

now that Avis is gone, if I am interested in teaching in the information school there. Could God really be opening a door and beckoning an elder statesman in his field to return, if only for a few weeks?

“Retirement—What Good is It?” Lived prayerfully, purposefully, and productively—retirement can be God’s gift to us if we can receive it with open hands. It can be good if we continue to use our callings for the Kingdom of God—now, with more time, energy, and resources. We may not be drawing an employer’s paycheck, but we still seek ways to follow the Great Commandments—to love God wholly and to love our neighbors fully. The life of faith does not end until our journey is complete when we join that forever family.

I wonder, what does God have in store for you in the challenge of retirement? I wonder what will be your response?

Prof. **Donald G. Davis, Jr.**, *BA, MA, MLIS, MATS, PhD*, has been Professor Emeritus of Library History at the School of Information and Department of History, *University of Texas at Austin, USA*, since 2005.

After various appointments in libraries Donald joined the Texas faculty in 1971, teaching courses in professional foundations, book and library history, collection development and publishing. He has also taught in the UK at the Department of Librarianship at the former *Birmingham Polytechnic*.

Donald Davis has been an active participant in professional and scholarly societies since the mid-1960s and has been awarded many honours by relevant organisations. From 1977 to 2005 he edited the journal ***Libraries and Culture*** and he has written and edited many books, articles and book reviews. A festschrift in his honour ***Libraries and Culture: Historical Essays*** was published by the *Library of Congress* in 2006.

Donald is a Life Vice-President of the *Librarians’ Christian Fellowship* and a Past President of the (American) *Fellowship of Christian Librarians and Information Specialists*.