

# RETIREMENT AND THE PROFESSIONAL CHORAL DIRECTOR



## Transition Journey: From Employee to Retiree

by Frank R. Lloyd

“It’s six days of Saturday and on the seventh day the big paper comes!” That was my friend’s enthusiastic description of retirement soon after he left his employer. In June 2018, I retired from Southern Methodist University (SMU). My first four months were just as he described. It was hard to remember what day of the week it was.

The major activity of the first four months was travel. My wife and I visited Kenya, Italy, New Mexico, Colorado, Northern Michigan, and East Texas, traveling with and visiting friends and family. This made the first four months seem like holidays.

After the trips finished, it was time to discover new priorities and routines. At about four months into his retirement, my friend felt the same. A physician, he became a volunteer teacher to interns and resident medical students. We feel the need to engage in things with meaning because it is hard to give up making a difference. I embarked on a quest to identify new opportunities for meaning, passion, growth, and service.

I quickly realized that the transi-

tion from employee to retiree is a *life* transition, so I set out to answer seven questions:

- 1) How can I stay professionally active?
- 2) How can I become more involved in my community?
- 3) How can I cultivate my faith and spirit?
- 4) How can I better maintain my body?
- 5) How can I continue to travel to stay in touch with widely dispersed family and friends?
- 6) How can I be a better friend to those who increasingly experience challenges of aging and transitions?
- 7) How can I develop new creative impulses in art and music and maintain my fifty-year commitment to choral singing and the joy it brings?

I sought as many friends and colleagues as I could, confident that their perspectives would yield an expanded set of new possibilities, options I would not have discovered on my own.

I spoke with many retirees. Without fail they all said the same four things:

- 1) “I should have retired sooner.”
- 2) “I have no trouble staying busy.”
- 3) “Take your time; don’t feel like you have to jump on the first things that come along; choose wisely.”
- 4) “You will miss IT support!”

The first three lessons of retirees let me know that a *life* transition takes time, patience, trial and error, and selectivity to settle on new priorities and a new routine.

To answer my questions, I had to reframe the transition. “Elderhood” better captures the life phase one enters after childhood and adulthood. The role in this life-phase is to model

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values, provide wisdom, and serve interests beyond the self. The transition to this phase is a journey, and it consists of three phases.

## Endings

The first is endings. Many people asked how I knew it was time to retire. Several indicators prompted the decision.

1) As my seventieth birthday came and went, I realized that the time available for priorities other than SMU would be increasingly limited.

2) At the same time, change was occurring at SMU that restricted prospects for future growth in my area.

3) Although I felt no pressure from the university leadership, I wanted to step down when it was my decision.

4) I felt my staff was ready to go forward effectively in my absence.

5) I found myself caring less about the business goals that had driven me and my department for nearly fifteen years.

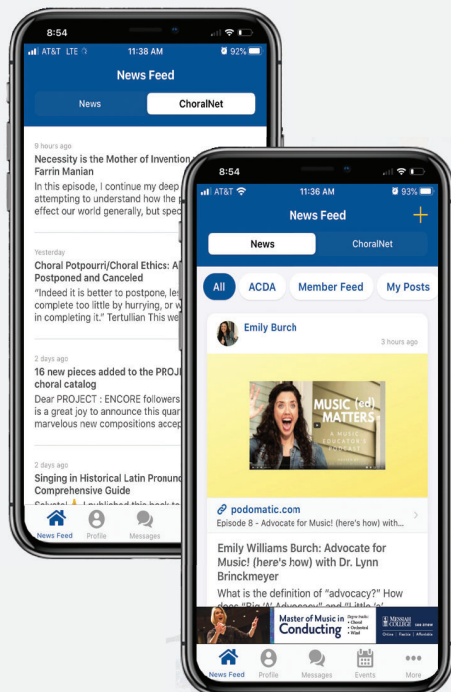
This list of indicators represents more hindsight than forethought. The simple answer to how I knew it was time to retire is, “I just knew.”

## Neutral Zone

Once you take the step you disengage from your employer and enter the second phase, a period of uncertainty—a “neutral zone.” It can be unsettling, but recognize it. Embrace it. Be patient.

I disengaged from my area at SMU. I had almost no contact with former colleagues. However, I stayed engaged with the university. My wife and I attend events without

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feeling obliged to network with people as clients, instructors, or service providers. This relationship with the school feels delightfully freer than an employment relationship.

Besides my relationship with SMU, there are three other areas in the neutral zone that I had to adapt to.

One is *time*. As an elder, I am freed from externally imposed roles and time frames, such as the university's semester and fiscal year. I can take shorter and longer views: "What will I do today?" "What might I do over the coming years?" And "What is my legacy?"

The second area of adjustment in the neutral zone is *administration*. Following retirement, I quickly discovered that the "yo-yo" principle—"you're on your own"—applies not just to tech support but to many other administrative tasks. As an employee, once a month I received a one-page document from my employer covering income, benefits, taxes, and other deductions. As a retiree, those items are disaggregated, and I am responsible for them all.

I also had to take personal responsibility for my well-being. This can be a revelation for retirees whose employers provided them with medical services. Now, in addition to a schedule of regular check-ups, I must ensure my providers accept my coverages and unravel the explanation of benefits forms that seem to come from everywhere.

Retiring employees should avoid being surprised or frustrated when time for these tasks gets in the way of more interesting and fun activ-

ities.

The third neutral zone adjustment is *spouses*. It is not just the retiree making a transition. One friend confided that she was more stressed about her husband's impending retirement than he was. People like her can take comfort that a transition can be planned, not feared. The spouse should be involved in and supportive of the plan. Another friend encouraged her spouse to find projects, passion, and purpose, and he has used these "3 P's" as touchstones to keep him busy, committed, and connected.

Such dialog should be personal, couple by couple, so it would be presumptuous of me to prescribe general guidelines. However, there is an old joke that can serve as a basic rule of thumb for retirees and spouses who must address changes in their daily routines: "for better or worse, but not for lunch!" A better

guideline might be "parallel work; parallel play" to accommodate one another's needs for space and "alone time" along with new "together time."

### Beginnings

The third phase of the journey is new beginnings. Two years following my retirement I am well along towards re-engagement.

I discovered a life review tool that helped me filter the possibilities. After sorting and discarding the books, papers, and files I brought home from my SMU office and combining them with the pre-SMU materials in my home office, the materials I kept revealed key life experiences, parts of my past, including choral singing, that led to meaning and growth, fun and passion. I started to create and update written messages about these experi-



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riences.

Here is where I now stand on my seven questions.

- 1) Professional. I now belong to the Center for Management and Executive Development's mentor alliance, where I am available to help center leaders at second- and third-tier universities build successful businesses and advance their careers.
- 2) Community. I joined the board of a Dallas nonprofit that teach-

es English to adult immigrants.

- 3) Faith and spirit. Weekly Bible classes at my church satisfy my current spiritual needs.
- 4) Body. Working with a personal trainer at the Y improved my strength and stamina.
- 5) Travel. My wife and I established a routine to visit friends and family annually while we pursue "bucket list" destinations.
- 6) Friendship. Regular lunches with friends help me connect with common needs and interests in elderhood.
- 7) Creativity. While my guitar has yet to be taken out of mothballs, I spent one afternoon with a good friend who oriented me to oil painting—color theory, composition, perspective, space, and equipment. My first attempt at a picture was discouraging. The more I mixed colors the more I got gray and brown. Then I saw an early Van Gogh that gave me hope. It depicted a gray house in a brown field! Impressionists' gestural brushstrokes suggest to me that life can be seen as a series of brushstrokes. Each act represents a "brushstroke" in a lifework. Now I am replacing the painter's brushstrokes with my writing about what the singer Sting called "the touchstones of the landscape of my life."

those touchstones. When I entered Occidental College in 1965, I took a friend's advice and joined the college and chapel choirs. I sang all four years I was there, and I sang in church choirs over the ensuing fifty years. Learning and performing choral works has allowed me to experience the emotional and physical thrills of blending into an ensemble whose output is greater than the sum of its individual parts. It has immersed me in caring communities, the world's best music, and inspiring messages. Losing myself in the ensemble connects me to something greater, which foreshadows a life to come. Now, the presence of Covid-19 along with my advancement to elderhood makes the possibility of that next life more imminent. My choral experience comforts me that losing myself in something larger is not to be feared.

This is so even though the pandemic shut down my church choir March 15. Our current choir roster contains nearly 140 names; many are in high-risk demographics. Our physical infrastructure makes social distancing, masking, and testing during rehearsals and worship services problematic. Local restrictions on gatherings do not allow more than ten people in the sanctuary to record online worship services. A small group of low-risk singers who are willing and able to form ensembles that meet local gathering guidelines lead hymn singing and provide offertory music during online worship. While the entire choir is not able to make music together, our choir community continues to support one another.

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- A weekly newsletter includes individual singer profiles as well as members' joys and concerns. The Choir Cares Committee remains active and responds to concerns.
- Regular meetings are held online to keep the entire community apprised of plans to open public worship and prospects to re-engage the entire choir.
- The staff regularly telephones members to check in with them.
- Individual members initiate messages of support.
  - Our prior accompanist offers soothing and inspirational piano music weekly on Facebook.
  - One of our Bass II's is the composer-in-residence for the Dallas Winds orchestra. He, too, is an SMU retiree. Like me, he is reviewing and updating his life work. On a regular basis he distributes excerpts from his compositions, less than ten minutes each, attached to an email that explains the music's backstory.
  - I shared an essay about my life as a choral singer—how I started, why I continue, and the joys of connection, community, and music quality I still find when I lose myself in our ensemble.<sup>1</sup> This is to remind others of all the reasons we sing and that the connections we share sustain us even though we are not singing together now.

Connection such as I gain through choral singing is critical in not experiencing retirement as a succession of Saturdays. I also cultivate and widen my network in pursuit of answers to the questions about what's important that structure my transition to elderhood. The transition is a three-phase process that supports a search for meaning, passion, growth, and service. It begins with ending. It continues in neutrality—when you explore and filter new possibilities and adapt to new time perspectives, assume new administrative responsibilities, and discover new arrangements with your spouse. It ends with new beginnings, new priorities, and new routines that shape the onward

journey. It is an engaging journey that I feel no urgency to complete. 

**Frank R. Lloyd** is the retired associate dean of Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business and a bass II in Highland Park United Methodist Church's (Dallas) Chancel Choir.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Frank Lloyd, "First a Voice, Then a Choir" ([choralnet.org/2020/07/first-a-voice-then-a-choir](http://choralnet.org/2020/07/first-a-voice-then-a-choir)) July 8, 2020.



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