



# THE PASTOR'S PEN

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## What's Next?

First of all, I wish to thank Linda, Jerrie and their cohorts for the card and the bag of “retirement goodies” to help fill up the hours that I will not be using going to drill or traveling all over Florida. After five years, it will be an adjustment and your suggested, substitute activities will be considered when I am wondering what to do with my time. Still, it is hard to believe that I’m actually retiring from the Army. When we reach milestones like this it oftentimes causes us to take a look back and evaluate what has happened to us over the last couple of decades of our lives and then consider what the future holds.

In my tenure as a military Chaplain I have learned a few things about ministry and people that I could never have learned anywhere else. Add to that the lessons I’ve learned from thirty-eight years of community church work and I believe that I have come to understand a great deal about what it takes to be a better disciple of Christ and a better minister in this world from these experiences.

I would like to share some of these insights from my experience with you and see what you think. Read over the following observations and see if you agree or disagree with some of my conclusions. One thing I realize is that I am not nearly as smart as I thought I was thirty years ago, so I really do want your feedback on my conclusions.

- I have learned that trying to say something every Sunday that relevant, helpful and spiritually sound is incredibly demanding. As a result, there will be good sermons and there will be bad ones. I just have to try my best to give the Holy Spirit something to work with each week.
- I have learned that loving people and being with them in times of personal crisis is what ministry is about.
- I have learned that everyone has bad days, so I try not to take it personally when I am on the receiving end.
- I have learned that old German proverb is true: We get too soon old and too late smart.
- I have learned that some of the nicest people that you would ever want to meet never go to church and that some of the meanest ones do. Also, it happens the other way around.
- I have learned that the best sermons are the ones that reach both the head and the heart.
- I have learned that not everyone who praises you is your friend and that not everyone who criticizes you is your enemy.
- I have learned you should never interfere with the women’s group or the choir.

- I have learned that it's not important to win every battle. Likewise, that it is important to pick your battles wisely.
- I have learned that the psalmist was right: "A merry heart does good like a medicine."
- I have learned that the greatest compliment that a family can give a minister is to call him at 2:00 in the morning because he is needed.
- I have learned that people can take themselves too seriously, but that you can never take God too seriously.
- I have learned that 80% of the work of the church is done by less than 20% of the people.
- I have learned that it only take 10% of the group or 8 people (whichever is larger) to determine the entire direction of a congregation and its leadership. The rest will almost always follow without serious opposition.
- I have learned that being loved by the church family where you serve is worth every hour worked, every problem faced, every criticism received, every tragedy overcome, every set back endured when you are walking alongside the flock.
- I have learned how important it is to be able to laugh at yourself. After all, everyone does and you might as well join in the fun. Especially when it is deserved.
- I have learned that no matter what may come to pass, God is in charge and He can use whatever we do for him. However, we still have the responsibility to give Him as much to work with as we can.

So what do you think? I could probably go on for another page or two but the bottom line is not just what I learned, but how well I've been able to do it and also pass it on to others. Thinking back over the past few decades the greatest lesson that I have learned is not some deep theological secret or some lost teaching. No, the greatest lesson that I have learned is that if God can use old country boy like me, with all my faults and mistakes, what great things can He do with you? Of course, the only way to find out is give Him the opportunity and we are never too old and it is never too late to give God the chance to use us and work through us. Are you willing to let Him?

Looking forward to another decade or two of learning,

*James*