



THE PASTOR'S PEN

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Thanksgiving and the New Year

It is almost Thanksgiving and then, the Christian New Year begins on Nov. 30 with the first Sunday of Advent. Another year is done and a new one is about to break forth. In looking back on the past, as we plan for the future, let me ask you: are you ready for the New Year that is upon us? Do you know what you will be doing in 2015 in service to your Lord? Are you ready to be a part of the work and the calling of the Church? If you are a Christian, then you are part of an active team that has been commissioned by Jesus Christ Himself to go forth and make disciples. In the Church, there are no pew warmers. No matter how young or how old, how firm or how infirm, there is a place for everyone and the responsibility to live each and every day as His disciple.

A part of that daily task is remembering to be grateful for God's care and blessings. In the events of day-to-day life, we sometimes fail in [being grateful](#) and recognizing all of the good that is done on our behalf. I want to share an [inspirational](#) story I heard the other day, that demonstrates there are often many people working on our team that we often times fail to recognize for their good work.

This [story](#) is about a US Naval Academy graduate and jet fighter pilot in Vietnam by the name of Charles Plumb. Charles had completed seventy-five combat missions by the time he was shot down. He ejected from his plane and parachuted into enemy hands where he would spend the next six years in a Vietnamese prison. Fortunately he survived, and today lectures on the many lessons he learned during his captivity and naval career.

One day while eating at a restaurant with his wife during a speaking tour, a man came up and said, "Your Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down!"

"How in the world did you know that?" asked Plumb. The man replied, "Because I packed your parachute." Charles Plumb in surprise and [gratitude](#) had to catch his breath. The man then shook his hand and said, "I guess it worked!" Plumb assured him it had and said, "If your chute hadn't worked, I wouldn't be here today."

That night Plumb could not sleep. He said, "I kept pondering what he might have looked like in a Navy uniform – a Dixie cup hat, a bib in the back, and bell bottom trousers. I wonder how many times I might have seen him and not even said good morning, how are you or anything because, you see, I was a fighter pilot and he was just a sailor."

Plumb's thoughts soon focused a lot on the man who had packed his parachute before his last flight over Vietnam. He thought of the hours the man spent working at a wooden table in the bottom of that enormous ship, carefully packing Plumb's and dozens of others chutes. He realized that this one man held in his hands the chute; the fate of someone he did not even know, and that by his faithful performance of his main duty, he was responsible for the survival of others who found themselves in trouble.

Charles Plumb is now a motivational speaker, telling this story to hundreds. He always ask his audiences after telling it, "Who's packing your parachute?"

In our life many people have had a hand in packing our parachutes. Are we taking the time to acknowledge them, thank them and reward them? It is very easy to overlook the work of the many. When an athletic team has won a championship they always cheer the MVP, but do you ever hear them thank the trainer, the cook or the bus driver? Do they ever take the time to recognize or reward them? It takes a lot of people to create a championship team. The same is true for the Church.

Let me tell you a secret about Church Growth and what it takes to make a strong congregation. It is not the minister that builds up a Church: it is the rank and file of the membership working together, being faithful and caring for others as they know that Jesus and His disciples did. It is the Sunday School teacher, the nursery worker, the cooks and the clean-up folks that serve together in the name of Christ, that support our fellowship and help us grow closer to each other over a cup of coffee or a pot luck dinner. It is the people who toil together, volunteering their time next to each other, sharing the burdens of yard care and clean-up. It is people whose lives are shared in common service for Jesus Christ, who go out calling on the sick, the visitors and those in need and who share the love of God with others that grow a congregation. A common goal that everyone can see and work towards as a team also makes a congregation grow; especially when that goal is in line with the teaching of the scriptures. As people study God's word and learn how to live together according to the will of their Creator they attract others who want to share in their joy and their fellowship. Church growth is just a by-product of that natural process.

What destroys a congregation? People who stay away from classes and services, who miss opportunities for fellowship and who lose out on learning what God has to say to them. A loss of purpose or belonging, a loss of meaning or accomplishment will also cause the people to leave a congregation and cause the door to be shut for good. Lone Ranger attitudes will break down teamwork quickly and rob joy from the people's attendance. One or two people trying to do a task without involving others in planning or execution will push folks away. Ignoring the needs of the visitors and the membership will also turn folks away. Accidental exclusions from not inviting others or giving them a chance to help out will say to them, "we really don't need you." So if they think they are not needed, they leave. Then, we wonder why they left and what will get them to stay or come back?

The heart of the matter is that people really want to be needed. We all want to be a part of a team and share in a real community that cares for each other. This is how God has made us and why fellowship is so important to the Church. Teamwork, fellowship, cooperation, family, togetherness are all needed to make life full and the Church grow. In short, it means that we must be there for each other. It means that we need to take time to help pack each other's parachute.

With the New Year, what will you be doing to help your congregation grow? What will you be doing to involve yourself in the life of your congregation? Who will be on your team and there for you? Who will be helping pack your parachute and who's parachute will you be helping to pack?

Getting ready for the New Year,

James