

EUGENE & JANICE PETERSON

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Dear Pastor Wytsma,

Thank you for your appreciation.

But I don't know that I can give you much worthwhile counsel. Seven years ago my son was the organizing pastor of a church in Spokane. He asked me for counsel, by letter and telephone. By that time it was 40 years after I had done it. I found myself almost always saying, "You are working in a totally different culture than I did—I have no intuitive feel for what you are doing. We'll talk about it, we'll pray about it, but basically you're on your own."

The things that I did that I think still apply are: One, I ignored the church growth books and counsel—I am convinced that it is basically flawed, imagining the church as something that can be developed by strategies and techniques, eroding the biblical imagination that understands church as a creation of the Holy Spirit. Church growth rhetoric puts me in charge, regardless of the pious disclaimers to the contrary. Too much American culture gets into shaping such congregations—they turn out to be consumer congregations.

Two, I knew it was going to take a long time and so refused to try to get things done in a hurry. I was committed to relationships, with one another and with God, and knew there were no shortcuts. Patience, patience, patience. And it did take a long time. But nearly all the new churches that started at the time I did it are long gone, although some of them had spectacular beginnings. And Christ Our King continues to flourish after 45 years.

Three, I kept programs at a minimum, just the bare essentials. I wanted to develop a worshiping community not a collection of religious consumers. I kept the worship simple and quiet. And I spent a lot of time in people's homes, getting to know them. Slow work. One at a time. I don't think there is any way to develop intimacy, community, giving each soul dignity other than relationally.

Four, I made it a priority to seek out the misfits, the non-leaders, the losers. I wasn't looking for "leadership material." I was after souls and thought the best way I could keep my pastoral soul, was to avoid the temptations to cozy up to the beautiful people (although a few of them managed to make it in

too!).

And that's about it. I am very glad to have had the opportunity to do it. I was with that congregation for 29 years. What I learned in that context has shaped virtually everything I have written, and maybe, most of all, *The Message*, as I learned to listen to their language, the way they used words and developed the pastoral conversations that got into the vernacular of *The Message*.

You mentioned DNA. I was recently reflecting with my pastor son that my grandfather was a Norwegian immigrant in this valley where I am now living and in which I grew up. He was a blue collar working man but also a lay preacher. He gathered the early settlers into his home for bible studies and prayer meetings. These people became nuclei for the first churches in the valley. My mother when she was about 40 years old started a pentecostal church in a small outlying town in our valley. Then I did it in Maryland. And most recently my son in Spokane. Four generations. I think our family might have a new church development gene in our DNA!

The peace of our Lord

*Erasmus*