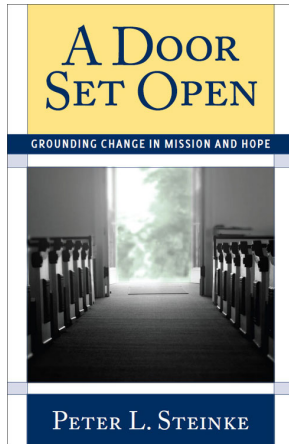


## Jim's Tool Box

"There Once Was a World"

A Book Review: Peter Steinke's *A Door Set Open*



Peter Steinke is best known for his work in applying the family systems theory of Dr. Edward Friedman to congregational life. In his latest book *A Door Set Open*, Steinke takes on the challenge of addressing the major cultural shifts that have affected the church in the last thirty years. Many mainline congregations have been dramatically impacted by these changes. More specifically these changes continue to influence congregations across the West Ohio Conference and the Capitol Area South District.

In the weekly Alban email, a few weeks ago, an article by Steinke summarized his book. It was the beginning of the article (that is part of the book) that caught my attention:

*There once was a world where the church functioned according to what some have called the "attractional" model (others have named it the participatory model). People come to a place, consume the spiritual goods, and serve as patrons to "meet the budget." But a shift has happened. North American culture has taken new turns.*

Steinke continues in his book by quoting church consultant Anthony Robinson, "...Much of what is being faced and experienced by many mainline Protestant churches is not about them. It is about the end of an era, a sea change in the religious ecology of North America and the role of congregations in our society. American Christendom is over."

Steinke then discusses the factors that have led to this dramatic change in the landscape of the American culture that have caused these shifts. He draws on family systems theory to describe the dilemma that leaders face in the challenging times in which congregations find themselves today.

In chapter two, Steinke brings the emotional impact of change on a congregation's life. He points out that leaders often underestimate the emotional response to change within the congregation. For example, he notes that during anxious periods, what is needed most – imagination – is most unavailable. Reacting supersedes thoughtfulness, Steinke says, "Anxiety locks up imagination and misplaces the key."

Chapter three is a discussion of the biblical meaning of hope. Steinke uses the Babylonian Captivity as a touch point and metaphor for the current reality in many congregations. He says that instead of hope we (as were the ancient Israelites) are tempted by despair, denial, and magic. He writes, "The loss of members, influence, and a sense of mission – the church's misfortune of the moment – resembles the experience of Israel's exile. Congregations ask,

Can we sustain our spirit? Will our corporate psyche fall to a painfully low level? Is denial, despair, or magic the best we can do?"

To those questions, Steinke introduces the biblical concept of hope. He cites some etymologists who say that the word *hope* derives from the German *hop* that means, "leaping expectations." Steinke writes that hope is an exuberant response, particularly when things are in reverse.

Steinke addresses the issue of change in chapter four. In writing about change, he takes up the role of clergy as transformational leaders. He says that he has serious doubts about much that is being offered as transformational leadership training. "Most of it," he says, "is about implementing a pattern developed elsewhere and has to do with technique and data collection."

In keeping with the family systems approach, Steinke addresses the emotions that are evoked with the notion of change in a system such as the church. He points out that there is an emotional component to the change. He says, "Transformation redefines who we are and what we do. It is always an emotional experience. For one thing, transformation begins with *endings*. Death comes to the system in some form."

He challenges the notion that mission is defined by growth. In writing about Matthew 28: 18-10, he offers a different take on this "mandate" for mission. He says that the mandate "Go!" is not in the original Greek. Rather the translation is a participle form "going." The translation would be, "as you go." Steinke points out that with this change the meaning of mission is broadened to include what Mennonite theologian David Augsburger describes as, "...a call to authentic, faithful witness in all of life."

Steinke continues to discuss the mission of the church in chapter six where he addresses the issue of "mission drift." He points out that mission drift is a significant issue for congregations that are in decline. Steinke also talks about the need for a congregation to recover a sense of mission as he writes, "After many years of being together, though, people may wonder what happened to the purpose, to the vision, to the creativity, and to the meaningful service that once energized them. This is normal. Again and again, we have to explore why we come together. Congregations need to continue to review who they are and how they will respond."

In the next chapter, Steinke comes back to the theme of hope. He notes that the Christian physicist John Polkinghorne remarked that hope is not a mood but a commitment to action. The character of hope implies that whatever we hope for we will be prepared to work for, thus bringing it about as we are able. Steinke declares, "The living hope of Christians is the basis of Christian mission. It is the hope for the poor, the sick, the despairing, the stranger, the homeless, the hungry, the neglected, the embittered, and those shackled in their own paranoia."

In a chapter entitled “The People of the Way,” Steinke discusses mission as movement. He points out that our brains are not really for thinking but for regulating our movement and the detecting the movements of other living things and objects. Steinke says that the kingdom of God is shorthand for God setting into motion a plan to mend life.

In chapter eight he uses the story of the blind men touching the elephant and describing what the elephant is like depending on the part they touched. He says that Edwin Friedman talked about touching the elephant wherever the elephant appears. It is a way of suggesting the complexity of many situations. Steinke says that one can only observe what is there in front of him or her. He applies this principle to the mission of the church. He writes that no congregation has to cover every part of the elephant (mission). Instead a congregation should seek to touch whatever aspect of mission that is within reach.

Friedman says that all congregations need to touch *tikkun olam*, a Jewish concept that means, “to mend the world.” I found that phrase to be a powerful image of what the work of the church is as we seek to follow Jesus Christ on to the mission field today. This is something that every congregation can do and needs to do. Every group of believers can seek to “mend the world” in the neighborhood and community in which they are located even if that community or neighborhood has changed over the years.

In the last chapter of this book, Steinke offers a teaching/reminder about the importance of differentiation as a leadership skill. Leaders can be cut off emotionally from those they seek to lead or they can dominate those whom they seek to lead. Neither of these paths is the path of the self-differentiated leader. As Steinke puts it, “Differentiation of self is a lifelong process of defining oneself and staying connected to others.” He discusses in this chapter issues such as change that matters, working from the ground up, and the importance of reframing issues.

I found Steinke’s book (134 pages) to be very readable. Steinke applies the family system theories and the teachings of Edwin Friedman to the importance of local congregations recovering their sense of mission. He uses a number of interesting illustrations that bring home the truth of the principles he lifts up in the book. This is a book about hope in the midst of a challenging time for many congregations and those who seek to lead congregations in these days.

This book would be a good book for a visioning team to read together as a congregation sets about the work of renewal and rediscovery of the mission and purpose of their congregation. The pastor and other leaders will find useful truths and illustrations here for teaching the congregation about the importance of hope and the recovery of our mission as the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.