



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

Pastor's Update

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Peter Steinke is a Lutheran pastor and counselor who has specialized for the past twenty years or so as a consultant for congregations, especially those which are experiencing significant conflict. This has led Steinke to create a "Healthy Congregations" program which has been widely accepted throughout the ELCA and other mainline churches.

Steinke approaches his work with congregations from a family systems viewpoint, believing that churches act very much like families, and that family systems theory can give us many answers as to what is taking place. The teacher he gives most credit to for his work and insights is Dr. Edwin Friedman, a Jewish Rabbi, whose book Generation to Generation has become almost a classic in leadership studies. In fact, I heard one professor say that the ninth chapter of Friedman's book is the finest chapter ever written on church leadership.

Peter Steinke is the author of some nine books, including the very popular How Your Church Family Works. But it is his latest book that has triggered this particular update, a new book I just read entitled Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What.

The most important behavioral trait of a Christian leader, says Steinke, is to develop what he calls a "non anxious presence." In other words, no matter what kind of storms may be swirling about, effective leaders do not get caught up in the emotion of the moment or in the passions of the transitory, but rather remain "self-differentiated." He even asserts that if a leader panics in a time of anxiety, you have no leader.

This latest book examines the very pervasive phenomenon of anxiety today. He believes that we are living in a world where the collective anxiety is being ratcheted upward and in many cases flowing out of control. The more anxious we become, he says, the more conflict which is engendered both in ourselves and in the institutions in which we participate, not the least being the local congregation.

Christians may often repeat the magnificent words of Philippians 4, "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in*

prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus," but that is not often the way life. Anxiety runs over.

Steinke then seeks to define anxiety. He says that in its most basic form anxiety is an automatic response to some kind of threat, real or imagined. Anxiety can be a gift, it is given to us to protect us from potential harm. Anxiety propels us toward self preservation and the safeguarding of those closest to us, and makes us "more alert, more self conscious, more motivated to take action." To not be anxious in the face of some very serious threats in our culture would be naïve and even dangerous.

But on another level, anxiety can paralyze us and our institutions. The very word anxiety comes from the root word which means "to choke, to cause pain by squeezing, to have the throat pressed together." This is what happens often in a time of anxiety, we can hardly breathe, we tighten up, we are constricted, and our energy is depleted.

Another byproduct of anxiety is that it is very often contagious. Anxiety connects people with one another and can even become frenzy. For instance, let one or two people unleash their anxiety in a congregation and it is not long before it can have a ripple effect.

Steinke says that there are two basic kinds of anxiety. The first is what he calls "acute anxiety." Acute anxiety is usually situational and time based. In other words, there are events in life which cause us serious anxiety, a momentary loss of self composure. This can be a tragedy, a death, an illness, a national or international crisis. But acute anxiety typically only lasts a short time, it runs its course and people eventually get back on track in their everyday lives.

The second kind of anxiety is "chronic anxiety." Chronic anxiety is a much more powerful and sometimes toxic force. Those who experience chronic anxiety seem to be perpetually in crisis, manifested both in their relationships and experiences. Chronic anxiety need not be related to any specific threat or danger, but just about anything can

trigger the release of this kind of anxiety.

Steinke uses two biblical images to make his point. When Peter is confronted after Jesus' arrest with the accusation that he too was with Jesus, he suffers acute anxiety. He adamantly and profanely denies this claim, literally exploding in anger at the allegation. Suddenly, however, he hears the rooster in the distance and he is overwhelmed with sorrow. Acute anxiety did not last long and Peter soon returns to leadership.

On the other hand, chronic anxiety seemed to grow among the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. It was one crisis after another. Moses and Aaron were constantly trying to mollify the people. God sent Ten Commandments to help organize the society, but nothing seemed to help. Chronic anxiety was endemic in that community.

In the 21st century, Steinke says, the huge influence of media has heightened our sense of anxiety. It seems like much of the broadcast industry seeks to foment more anxiety, of course with the hope that anxious people will come back for more. Cable TV, talk radio, internet blogs, etc seem to revel in making people more anxious, more upset, and more frustrated with life.

Unfortunately, Steinke says, this chronic anxiety has spilled over into congregations in profound and disturbing ways and because it is chronic anxiety and not acute anxiety, it never quite seems to go away, it can be triggered by almost any issue or event. Most alarming, anxiety often becomes contagious and then sweeps out anything which gets in its way.

Based on his many years of consulting, Steinke says that most congregations simply do not know how to deal with chronic anxiety, and are almost clueless as to how to resolve conflict. Most of the time in a congregation when conflict happens the community just freezes, it becomes stuck and cannot extricate itself. It prays that time will resolve the conflict.

Also, he says, congregations are notorious for enabling or even sanctioning highly immature or destructive behavior by some of its members, sometimes even letting a handful of people hold the congregation hostage. What happens far too often, of course, when a congregation cannot solve the conflict, it begins to split apart, to divide into different groups. No wonder we have some 280 Protestant denominations in the U.S., many of them results of unresolved conflicts.

From a pastoral point of view, his next comments are especially incisive. Whenever there is chronic anxiety in a congregation, there becomes the propensity to find scapegoats. He defines this action as an attempt to pinpoint a culprit or find fault with someone. Those who experience chronic anxiety very often feel like it is someone else's fault, and they seek to identify the cause of their discomfort.

Most likely the scapegoating will be projected onto people who are the most responsible or the most vulnerable. Guess who that might be? We should not be surprised. Jesus often became the scapegoat when anxiety was high. Remember in Luke 7 when Jesus is at a banquet at the home of a Pharisee and a woman bursts in and pours perfume all over his feet and wipes his feet with her hair? Immediately the Pharisee stands up and blames Jesus, "Is there a scapegoat in the house?" Of course.

The result of this scapegoating is that it is very often the pastor or some visible staff person or lay leader who becomes the primary subject of the anxiety. Very often when there are two sides to some issue and the pastor either refuses to take sides, or does take one side or the other, it is almost inevitable that he or she will become the scapegoat for some chronic anxiety.

Steinke then says that leaders need to be able to provide a "non anxious presence." Leaders need to be able to self define, to self differentiate, to remain calm in the midst of the storm. I suppose Coach Tony Dungy of the Indianapolis Colts is a prime example of such an unflappable and non anxious presence. Even going through the throes of his son's suicide, he still demonstrated an amazing calmness of spirit.

One of the manifold blessings at Lutheran Church of Hope is that there is such a dearth of chronic anxiety in the system. It almost seems that in the leaders, in the walls and ceilings, and in the DNA there is this non anxious presence, a calming milieu, a Christ-centered, prayer focused peace. Of course we face acute anxiety quite often, the tragedies and misfortunes of life, but chronic anxiety has not taken hold in the congregation. Praise God.

For those who face chronic anxiety in themselves, in their family, in their work or in their congregation, I would recommend reading something by Peter Steinke. For those who want to go more in depth, read both Edwin Friedman and Peter Steinke, they provide a wonderful "one-two" primer.