

Unplanned ministry: Being Jackson's pastor

by [Eugene H. Peterson](#) in the [February 8, 2011](#) issue



© Deborah Cheramie

The telephone rang. I picked it up. A woman's voice: "Pastor, I have a problem. Can I come and talk with you?" Variations on that introduction are numerous in a pastor's life. What would it be this time? She interrupted my hesitating silence: "Maybe not a problem—it's a good problem." And then she introduced herself, "This is Donna. Remember me? I was Leif 's kindergarten teacher a few years ago."

I remembered her. Attractive and alive with enthusiasm. In Donna's first year of teaching, my wife, Jan, had been a volunteer teacher's aide in her classroom one day a week. She had also become acquainted with our daughter, Karen, in a pottery workshop they both attended. Jan and Donna liked each other and developed a casual friendship. One day, having greeted each other at the grocery store, they were making small talk, and something Donna said prompted Jan to say, "Why don't you come to church some Sunday?" Donna laughed. "Sunday is a blue-jeans day for me—I don't think I'd fit in." Jan said, "Karen always wears blue jeans to church. I think you would fit in just fine." Through the years when they would meet in a store or on the street, there would be some banter that usually included a reference to blue jeans. But she never came to church.

"Yes, Donna, I remember you. So what is this good problem?" She told me she had a friend, an old friend from high school days, who thought he had become a Christian

and asked her if she knew anyone he could talk to about it. She thought of me, although we had never met face-to-face (but I had seen her in action while visiting her classroom).

"Can I bring him to meet you?"

After school the next day she brought Jackson to meet me in my study at the church. The three of us got acquainted. I learned that Jackson had recently come back to his hometown after several years' absence, the last five of which he had lived in the federal prison at Leavenworth, serving a sentence for trafficking drugs in and out of Mexico. He had been released from prison and now was serving out another six months of probation in which he was able to work through the week but had to spend weekends in the local jail.

Then Jackson told me what had happened three days earlier, Sunday night, in his jail cell. "In the middle of the night I woke up, and my cell was full of light—a kind of pulsating light. It lasted maybe five minutes, it seemed like a long time. And then it was dark again. I was still in my bunk wondering what had happened, and then it came to me: 'I think I'm a Christian.' But I have no idea what that means. I don't know any Christians. Donna thought you might be someone I could talk to." He assured me that drugs were not involved. "I haven't used cocaine for over five years."

We agreed to meet for lunch every week and talk about what it means to be a Christian.

I soon learned that everybody in town knew Jackson. He had been the most accomplished athlete the local high school had ever graduated. He had a personality that exuded "juice," an infectious friendliness that was irresistible. When he entered a room, everyone there knew it. He had a kind of charismatic presence apart from anything he did or said.

Jackson had flexible hours. He was a used-car salesman, so we went to out-of-the-way restaurants and diners after the major lunch traffic had subsided, and we talked about faith and Jesus and prayer and just what went into being a Christian.

After about six weeks of these meetings, Jackson said, "Don't Christians pray before they eat?" I said yes, most do.

"Well, why aren't we doing it?"

I said that since he wasn't used to this kind of thing, I didn't want to make him uncomfortable by imposing my practices on him.

"If this is what Christians do, we better do it."

So I prayed before we ate. Then one week I said, "Jackson, you pray this time." He looked at me hard, stared in disbelief. And then he bowed his head and prayed. He prayed a long time. When he finally said Amen, he looked up and said, "I've never done that before."

From then on we prayed by turns. One week it was Jackson's turn to pray. We had ordered soup. After the soup was served, he bowed his head low over the soup. The waitress brought bread she had forgotten earlier and said, "Is something the matter with the soup?"

Jackson, with his head still bowed and with his eyes tightly shut, turned his face toward her and said, louder than he needed to, "We're praying."

There was no way to be an anonymous Christian when you were in the company of Jackson.

One week Jackson came with a question about some tracts that had been left in his jail cell. "What's a tith-ee?" A tith-ee? I scrambled to understand what he was asking. And then I got it—"tithe." I told him it was a practice of giving 10 percent of your income as an offering to God in worship.

"And Christians do this?"

I told him that not everyone did, but that there was precedent for it in the Bible and many Christians used it as a guideline.

"Now that I'm a Christian, I think I better do it. Since I'm in jail on Sundays, how about if I give my offering to you every week? And tell me again, how do you pronounce that funny word?"

And on and on it went. Exploring all the nooks and crannies of Christian practice. Getting the inside story of being a Christian. Figuring out just what this life of believing and praying consisted of. Learning how to read the Bible, not just to learn

something but to engage in a conversation with God. I learned a lot, too, getting the inside story on what the Christian life looked like when encountered for the first time.

When the six-month stint of his weekends in jail ended, he became part of our congregation and worshiped with us. He brought Donna with him. They both wore blue jeans.

Jackson was a recovering alcoholic and drug addict when I met him. He had developed his cocaine habit when he was serving in the military in Vietnam. One of the conditions of his probation was weekly attendance at AA and NA meetings.

Word began to get around in the subculture of recovering addicts. Largely because of Jackson, our church was becoming the congregation of choice among recovering addicts in our county who were motivated to find out more about the Higher Power.

One Sunday after the benediction, a woman introduced herself and then said, "What's going on here? I looked around and counted the people I knew. I felt like I was in an AA meeting."

"So how did you know we were here?"

"Jackson told me."

An intriguing thing about this for me was that I had learned early on that I was incapable of dealing with alcoholics and had taken the counsel of a man who had spent much of his life working with them not to even try. He told me I was too sympathetic, too compassionate, totally naive about the addictive personality. When I protested that that's just the way I was put together, he said, "Eugene, that's what I mean. Addicts lie a lot, and you believe every lie they tell you. Addicts deny a lot, and you accept the denials without questioning. Don't try to help them. If you feel you have to do something, send them to me."

I thought back through my life, wondering what it was that incapacitated me from being any help to the alcoholic. And then I remembered my paternal grandfather—an alcoholic. He was a carpenter who lived in Seattle—in Ballard, a Swedish immigrant neighborhood. When his drinking got out of control, which it did periodically, my dad would get a call from his sister: "Come and get Papa. Dry him out."

And my dad always did. He'd drive to Seattle, get his father and bring him to Montana to live with us for three or four months. There was always a carpentry project for him to work on. One summer it was building a garage. Another it was enclosing our front porch, in effect adding another room to our house. He never talked much, but I liked being around him as he worked. I asked him for stories from Sweden, but he either couldn't or wouldn't tell me any. But he didn't exactly ignore me. Instead, with his jackknife he produced miracles of whittled tops from empty spools of thread and animals from scrap lumber and gave them to me. He let me get tools for him and carry boards.

Sometimes he would disappear, and my father would get a call from a bartender, usually in the middle of the night, to come and get him; he had passed out. One summer he was gone for three days and when found was incoherent and raging, with snakes and spiders crawling all over him. I added a new term to my vocabulary that year: delirium tremens, the dread d.t.'s. His sick room was my basement bedroom. When I would enter to get an article of clothing, he would wail, "Grog, grog . . . Eugene, grog, please, some grog . . ."

The next summer he died in a bar in Seattle. We drove out for the funeral. I was 11 years old. When we filed by the open casket, I saw that one cheek was a massive bruise. And then this: his daughter, my Aunt Helen, fell on the casket, cradling his face in her hands and sobbing, "Papa, Papa, Papa, oh, Papa, oh Papa . . ."

I think now that every alcoholic I have ever met was my grandpa. My father's patient, uncomplaining, futile rescues; my grandpa's helpless inability to tell me stories of Sweden and my helpless inability to give him grog; my aunt's uncontrollable sobs bathing his face with her tears. No wonder all this emotion and loss and sorrow incapacitates me in dealing with the alcoholic.

It is a huge irony that I ended up as a pastor to so many recovering alcoholics. But *recovering* is the key word here. These men and women—without exception, I think—know the difference between dealing with alcoholism as a problem, which they are doing in their recovery, and living a life of faith in Christ as a gift and accepting me as their pastor as they do it.

Eventually Jackson and Donna asked me to marry them. They wanted a simple wedding with no guests, just Jan and me. But they did want some music. They both loved country music. "How about a song by Emmylou Harris?" She was a favorite of

theirs.

I suggested something more in keeping with the new life they were now living. "How about 'Farther Along'—what I think of as Christian country?" They agreed.

So after the prayers and scripture, the exchange of vows and the blessing, Jan and I, accompanied by my five-string banjo, sang:

Farther along, we'll know all about it,
Farther along, we'll understand why;
Cheer up, my brother, live in the sunshine,
We'll understand it all by and by.

Considering their new beginning and the long road ahead in their marriage and their life in Christ, it seemed an appropriate wedding song for Donna and Jackson.

When Jackson writes to me now he signs his name "Jackson 'Farther Along' Nelson."

This article is excerpted from The Pastor: A Memoir, published next month by HarperOne. © Eugene H. Peterson.