

Fusing justice and holiness: Ministry in the 21st century

An interview with [Dennis Sanders](#) in the [December 12, 2012](#) issue



Illustration by Timothy Cook. Below: photo of Dennis Sanders by Deb Murphy.

*What is pastoral ministry like these days, and how is it being shaped in new ways? The Century talked to pastors about the challenges and surprises of their early years in ministry. This interview is the ninth in [a series](#). Dennis Sanders is associate pastor at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Minneapolis. His primary focus is on empowering the congregation for outward mission; he also teaches classes in Christian formation and preaches once a month. A bivocational minister, Sanders works as communications specialist for the Twin Cities Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In 2008, he was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, an autistic spectrum disorder. Sanders blogs at [The Clockwork Pastor](#), part of the [CCblogs network](#).*

**What excites you most about ministry these days? What's been the hardest thing?**

It's hard to face the reality that what used to work doesn't work anymore. First Church shares the classic mainline story: it was a large congregation in the 1950s and '60s, and it lost members from the '70s onward. Now it is a far smaller congregation trying to figure out how to do ministry in this day and age.

Over the last year, several members of our congregation worked to get our archives digitized. Looking at all the old church bulletins from the 1950s, you realize that there were hundreds of people taking part in Sunday school—hundreds. When you have only a handful of folks in Sunday school these days, it can be really easy to think you're a failure.

I have to keep reminding myself that the past is the past, and we have to learn how to be church now. So that's also the most exciting thing: we're off the map now. We are trying new things and seeing what God is going to do with them.

In 2008, the congregation sold its building to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which graciously allowed us to stay as tenants for a few years while we decided what to do next. In 2010, we started talking with a Lutheran congregation and a United Church of Christ congregation that were making plans to share space at the newly



remodeled Lutheran church. We felt that God was leading us to join this partnership. of the SpringHouse Ministry Center in South sharing one building.

**How is this arrangement going so far?**

For the most part, it's going well. The challenge has been dealing with our different polities. Disciples tend to be pretty lay-driven. The pastor has a voice, but it's just that: a voice. The other two churches tend to have more power vested in the pastor. This means that we spend some time scratching our heads. But as time passes, we are becoming more understanding of our differences.

## **What's something important you've learned about ministry?**

That it's more of an art than a precise skill. In seminary, you learn all the skills: how to interpret scripture, how to plan and conduct worship, how to preach and so on. In the context of ministry, you realize that it is much, much more of an art: knowing when to be pastoral and when to be more prophetic and all of that. This isn't something you can learn at seminary. It's about trial and error in a ministry context—and the prompting of the Spirit.

## **What's an example of a mistake you've learned from?**

I had a problem with a staff person a while back. I should have been willing to ask this person some difficult questions to try to figure out why things weren't working out. But I didn't do that, and the problem festered and led to some turbulence in our relationship, though in the long run we were able to work things out. So I've learned about how to communicate better with coworkers.

## **How have pastors and others with more experience been helpful? Or unhelpful?**

First Church's interim senior pastor has been a wonderful mentor. He's treated me with respect, and I've learned a lot from him. That's not something you always get in senior-associate pastor relationships.

Other colleagues have been largely helpful as well. Here in Minnesota, you can't help but know a few Lutheran pastors. Many of them have been great friends to me, and I've learned from them.

## **What other mentors or heroes have shaped your understanding of ministry?**

Two of my heroes are in a way contradictory forces, but they share the same trait: courage. The first is Mary Albing, a Lutheran pastor in Minneapolis. She was called by her church even though she was a lesbian in a relationship, which at the time was in violation of the ELCA's rules. Mary was always the face of calm in the midst of the storm over sexuality. I'm a gay man, and her courage has been an inspiration to me. She reminds me that sometimes ministry means being faithful when the way seems uncertain.

The second is an elder at another Disciples congregation here in Minneapolis.

He is a kindly man, but we happen to disagree on issues related to sexuality. After a meeting at which this subject came up, he took me aside to tell me that he had done a lot of thinking and praying on the issue, but he just couldn't square that circle. After he said this, he started to cry. Though we were not in accord on this issue, he still thought of me as a fellow Christian—and he saw our relationship as important. It took courage to do what he did, and he reminds me that as a pastor and a Christian, I am called to love those who may not share my views.

### **What does being a leader mean? Has your understanding evolved?**

Leaders are people who don't always know what they are doing yet move forward in faith. I've often struggled with the notion of being a leader, mostly because I don't always think I have the qualifications. But then I remember that God called people like Gideon, who were not the most highly qualified but ended up being the leaders that they were called to be.

My Asperger's diagnosis, which came in 2008, brought me some peace after several years of struggle. But I was left wondering this instead: how can I be a good pastor when I'm autistic? I've learned that God works through me to provide leadership despite the challenges of Asperger's syndrome. While I work hard to be a good leader, it's more about how God works through us than it is about having all the skills.

### **Along with the challenges, has your disability brought specific gifts or blessings to your ministry?**

If there is an upside to being an "aspie," it's that I tend to be very analytical about my emotions. That doesn't mean I don't have emotions; it's just that people with Asperger's tend to process emotions differently. During very stressful times, I tend to be the "rock": the one who is thinking about what needs to be done. This can be helpful in pastoral emergencies.

The other gift is that I live in the moment. I tend to just do things, without always thinking about the consequences. That's not always the best thing, and it gets me into trouble at times. But I think it has its plusses, especially in the context of my work. Churches tend to be waiting for something to happen, the right pastor or youth leader or whatever to come their way and change things. But I tend to feel that now is the time. And I think that mainline Protestants need to be willing to just jump in and get involved, because that's the only way we will survive and thrive.

## **On the basis of your ministry experience so far, how would you want to change your seminary curriculum?**

I can think of two areas. The first is administration. I would have appreciated more of a focus on budgets—not just how to read a spreadsheet, but how to get the most out of declining resources. Pastors also often have to oversee a staff, which means we need a knowledge of managerial skills.

The other area is communication. Seminaries don't need to teach people how to use Facebook or Twitter or even how to make an awesome webpage—you can learn that elsewhere. We do, however, need to figure out how to use all this technology to spread the gospel. Evangelicals have the edge on using the media to communicate the faith. I am glad to see mainline Protestants like Presbyterian Bruce Reyes-Chow dragging us into the social media age. Now we just need to see seminaries follow his lead.

## **How does being bivocational affect the way you do ministry?**

It really sets limits on how much I can do in ministry at the parish level. My communications job with the Twin Cities presbytery is pretty demanding. I love the work, and I see it as part of my ministry—but it means that I can't give all my time to First Christian. As author Carol Howard Merritt has pointed out, being bivocational means having divided loyalties.

But this is an emerging model of ministry for mainline churches. Many can't afford a full-time pastor anymore, so they are looking to other models of ministry. Growing up in an African-American church, I remember that a lot of the pastors also had other jobs—this was in Michigan, so many of them worked in the auto industry. Bivocational ministry has been the lived reality in African-American and evangelical churches for quite some time, and increasingly it will be part of the reality in mainline churches as well. We will have to learn to adjust.

## **Is there also some symbiosis or mutual enrichment that happens, despite the time and energy demands? I wonder about this, especially given that both of your vocations directly serve the church.**

I think there is some symbiosis going on. Being a pastor enriches the job I do at the presbytery because it brings theology into communication. And being a communicator has helped me as a pastor to see how important it is that we learn

how to share our lives with one another through social media.

### **Where do you go for inspiration and renewal?**

This is an area I really need to work on. One very helpful thing was a midweek prayer service I took part in this summer. I worked with Jen Nagel—the pastor of Salem English Lutheran Church, one of our partners at SpringHouse—and together we planned worship services based on Prayers Around the Cross, a contemplative service that comes from the Lutheran tradition. The simplicity and quiet were restorative for me.

One of the things I deal with as someone with Asperger's is that I always tend to be moving—I'm never still. But the rhythms of the service, the candles and the quiet moments allow me to be calm. My active brain and body get a few moments of rest, and this really centers me.

### **What does your denominational affiliation mean to you?**

I grew up as a Baptist and came into the Disciples tradition in my twenties. Both then and now, the most meaningful thing for me is the centrality of communion. Disciples partake of it every Sunday. Communion reminds me why we bother to get up on Sunday mornings: it's about remembering the life, death and resurrection of Christ and being empowered to do ministry in Christ's name. The rest of the worship service could be a real mess, but as long as there's communion, everything is OK.

Sharon Watkins, our denomination's president, recently wrote a pastoral letter about homosexuality. She reminded all of us—those of us like me who support welcoming LGBT persons in the life of the church, and those who believe that scripture leads them to another conclusion—that we are equal at the Lord's Table. We may disagree with each other, but we will welcome each other at the table. That's a powerful image, one we need to hear today. It reminded me again that I'm glad to be a Disciple.

### **What developments would you like to see in your congregation's mission?**

We have done a creditable job in rebuilding our children's ministry, a process I think helped revive the congregation. I would like to see the church become stronger in the area of adult education as well. The goal is to help make strong disciples, to be able to articulate what it means to be a Christian and what that means for how we

live in the world.

### **Tell me about the process of rebuilding the children's ministry.**

When I joined the staff in 2008, there was no children's Sunday school at all. There hadn't been for a few years. One day I was talking to a member who was rather upset that the church no longer did anything for children. I remember saying to her, "So what are you going to do about it?"

That really got to her, and she started thinking. In a few months she was able to come up with a Sunday school program that made use of her talents in the arts. She got parents involved, and before long the children's Sunday school was back in business. Seeing the kids gather and get excited about learning the faith allowed the church to see that it had a future.

### **What about your hopes for the wider church?**

I think progressive Christians have to do a better job of fusing evangelism with social justice. We do a good job when it comes to issues like LGBT rights, but we don't do as good a job helping people become disciples of Jesus. Evangelicals are better at personal faith and holiness than we are. Ross Douthat recently got a lot of criticism from progressives when he wrote a column questioning the viability of liberal Christianity. Most people thought he was saying that liberal churches need to become more conservative, but he wasn't. He was saying that while we are outward focused (which is a good thing), faith has to be inward focused as well—and we are terrible at that.

Faith should not be an either/or proposition between justice and holiness. For some reason neither evangelicals nor progressive Christians in this country seem to be able find the sweet spot when it comes to social justice and evangelism. I hope this will change.

### **That brings to mind the Wesleyan notion of two kinds of holiness, personal and social. What resources from your own tradition can you draw on to push for this kind of change?**

Barton Stone, cofounder with Alexander Campbell of the Restoration movement of the early 19th century, believed that Christians should live as if the kingdom of God were here now. For Stone and his followers this meant living a countercultural life:

eschewing greed, materialism and slavery. Stone thought we humans were too flawed to usher in the kingdom but that we should try to live Christlike lives regardless.

How can we live as if God's kingdom were here now? Can we live in a way that makes people want to know more about God, a way that makes them want to join our countercultural movement? How can we practice our faith in a way that becomes a witness to the world? An answer to that question will include living a life that is both inward focused and outward focused, one that fuses justice with holiness.

**Describe an experience that made you think, "This is what church is all about."**

I did my clinical pastoral education at a transitional care facility in Minneapolis. On an Ash Wednesday there, one of the chaplains and I were going around to give ashes to people who couldn't make it to the weekly chapel service. A lot of the folks I visited probably didn't have a lot of time left in the world. I remember placing the ashes on their foreheads and saying the words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return"—and realizing just how real this was. The words had meaning to me for the first time. At that moment, church was about being fragile and finite and yet able to worship in the presence of God.