

Why I dread pastoral visits

My Asperger's and my ministry

by [Dennis Sanders](#) in the [May 13, 2015](#) issue



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In 2008 I was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder. For years I had wondered why I couldn't do things that everyone else did. I was relieved to finally have a name for what was going on with me. But I was also left wondering, because at that point I was looking at parish ministry positions for the first time. Pastors have to talk a lot, meet lots of people, and try to connect with them. Sometimes they have to steer through the storms of church politics. They have to know the rules that exist in a congregation, especially the unspoken ones. None of this meshed well with a disorder that makes communication a challenge.

Despite my doubts, that fall I became an associate pastor, with a discrete set of responsibilities around communications and mission. My time as an associate gave me confidence that I could do this pastor thing. But I didn't think I could ever be the sole pastor of a church. There are just too many things a solo pastor has to keep track of, too many people to give attention to. I believe God was listening to my

doubts, however, and preparing another challenge. In 2013 I began my first job in solo ministry.

I think I've done OK so far. As I like to tell people, I haven't driven the church into a tree. I've been reminding myself to say thanks to all the laypeople who keep the church going and to send notes to people who haven't been to church in a long time. Sometimes I don't understand why I have to do these things. I do understand by now that being a pastor is about caring for the people at least as much as knowing your theology. But it's challenging.

Take the typical Sunday at church. I spend a lot of time talking: making small talk, giving a children's sermon, thanking someone who brought food for the potluck, giving a sermon, and on and on. By the time noon rolls around, I am depleted. I know that most pastors say they are tired after preaching, but this is on a whole other level. I have to go home so that I can "power down." Asperger's is not just a communication disorder; it's also a sensory disorder. After this information overload, I need to be alone for a while to recharge my senses.

But that's not the only challenge. Some of the hardest things I have to do don't take place on Sunday.

One of the things that pastors do is visit people where they live. Some pastors love doing this. Some congregations have visitation pastors; the ones I know tend to be rather jovial and extroverted people. The church I serve doesn't have a visitation pastor. It has me.

Visiting people is hard for me, and it makes me nervous. I'm autistic. I'm bad at small talk, and it takes a lot of energy for me to meet people. What's more, like many with Asperger's, I overthink my time with people. I worry that I've said the wrong thing even when it looks like I haven't. And let's not even get into how much harder all this is on the phone.

As an associate pastor, I rarely made visits. As a solo pastor, I have to. I can't tell people that I'm autistic and, well, they'll just have to make do. It doesn't work that way.

So despite my dread, I go to the nursing home. I end up visiting some fascinating people there—folks who have lived some pretty interesting lives. Even as my eyes dart around and I count the moments till I can leave, I enjoy getting to know these

people. When I leave, I am thankful to leave. But I am also grateful for the time to talk with people. I am glad to just be there and hear their stories.

Another challenge is that pastors sometimes have to do something that wasn't planned, like visit a family in a sudden crisis. People with Asperger's tend to make sense of the world by imposing a rigid order. I like to plan things, and I hate surprises. But as a pastor, surprises are part of the package. Somebody dies, or has a bad accident, and you get a phone call in the middle of the night.

I actually got such a call back when I was an associate. We were between senior pastors, and a longtime church member died. I had to meet with the family. A wife of 60 years needed someone to hold her hand. My android brain might have wanted to protest, but I had a job to do. After all, the Christian life is filled with things we don't want to do, but we do them anyway for the greater glory of God. As a person with autism, there is a whole bunch of things I don't want to do, but God gives me the strength to do them.

It isn't easy. I make a lot of mistakes, and I spend a lot of time trying to rectify those mistakes. The worst thing about it? Most of the time I don't even know that I'm upsetting people by not doing something or not asking something. I come off as uncaring without realizing it.

But my autism has also made me more aware of the need for grace, the need to learn to love others even as they make mistakes, too. I'm not always good at being patient. But reminding myself of the way I can be helps me remember that I need a lot of grace from others, and they need it too. I can't pretend I have it all together, because I don't. It's all out there. I can't hide.

The apostle Paul had something he called a "thorn in his side." He asked God to take it from him. God replied, "My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness." For me, Paul's words bring to mind the 1980s pop song "Broken Wings":

So take these broken wings
And learn to fly again, learn to live so free.
And when we hear the voices sing,
The book of love will open up and let us in.

As humans, we find ways of hiding, of telling ourselves how great we are and basically telling ourselves and one another that we don't need God. Yet God loves us.

My autism is my thorn in my side, my broken wings. But God is able to do mighty things through me, things like visiting 90-year-old women at the nursing home. What's more, autism can also be a gift—not because it's wonderful, but because it lets me know that I am human after all. And I am still loved by God.