

Beyond redemption: Pastor to a killer

by [Robert Rhodes](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue

About the only person to stand by Dennis Rader—known as the BTK Strangler—since his arrest in February for ten vicious murders has been his pastor, Michael Clark. The pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in northern Wichita, where Rader was president of the church council, visited Rader twice a week in Wichita's Sedgwick County Jail while he awaited sentencing. Clark said he plans to maintain the relationship now that Rader is serving a 175-year prison sentence at the state penitentiary in El Dorado, Kansas.

Rader, a 60-year-old family man, churchgoer, Boy Scout knot expert and city employee in Park City, Kansas, was convicted of a string of murders in the Wichita area dating back to 1974.

Clark believes that his job as a minister is to reach out to people like Rader, just as he would to anyone else in his church, and help him find genuine forgiveness for his offenses.

"You just show him the path," Clark said in a September interview. "But he has to walk the path. I cannot do it for him. I cannot save his soul. There's a lot of work for Dennis to do."

Just how much work, Clark said, was evident in the rambling statement Rader made at the close of his August sentencing hearing. In that speech, Rader compared himself to his victims and did not express any substantial remorse for what he had done.

"Dennis's response was mostly about Dennis Rader," Clark said. "Not about his victims, not at all."

The families of those victims also have a place in Clark's heart, but he has not yet found a way to reach out to them. When some of the survivors got to face Rader for the first time at the sentencing hearing, he recalled, "I wanted to go over there and hug them and weep with them. [But] I could not hurt with them. I hurt *for* them. I have no concept of the pain they've been through the past 30 years."

Some of the victims' families are quite critical of Clark, saying that Rader, because of the cruelty of his "bind, torture and kill" murders, which include the murder of two children, is beyond redemption.

Clark doesn't agree. During their jailhouse discussions, Clark said he always reminds Rader that he is a child of God for whom the salvation of Christ is available. "He is not without hope," Clark said.

Clark said he has a short agenda when he visits Rader—to share scripture and pray with the confessed killer. The rest, he said, is up to Rader.

Clark said he and the entire congregation still have much shock, bitterness and anger to work through. Everyone in the church has been affected by the BTK arrest, especially the youth.

"Some of them are really having emotional turmoil over this," Clark said. He hopes the congregation can come together to discuss Rader's case from a biblical standpoint, in hopes of finding some degree of healing.

"We have to trust God in all of this," Clark said. "If we want to survive, we've got to stay in the Word. . . . I'm going to start an adult forum on Sunday mornings to talk about sin, anger, hardened hearts, grace, forgiveness, and how these feelings and emotions have an impact on our relationship with others and with God. What we've got to do is recognize the source of the evil."

One topic, however, will be off limits. "We're not going to talk about Dennis," Clark said. "Dennis is a member of our church, but we're not the BTK church. We are Christ's church."