

Urban experiments: Ministry in the 21st century

an interview with [Nanette Sawyer](#) in the [January 23, 2013](#) issue



Illustration by Timothy Cook. Below: photo of Nanette Sawyer by Allison Sichling.

*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 10th in [a series](#). Nanette Sawyer studied at Harvard Divinity School and McCormick Theological Seminary. She is pastor of both Grace Commons (which she founded as Wicker Park Grace) and St. James Presbyterian Church in Chicago, as well as a teaching pastor at McCormick and the University of Chicago Divinity School. The author of *Hospitality—The Sacred Art: Discovering the Hidden Spiritual Power of Invitation and Welcome (Skylight Paths)*, Sawyer blogs at [A Transformed Faith](#).*

What excites you most about ministry these days?

I've been given an opportunity to color outside the lines, the permission and charge to be creative and experimental. Some things have failed, but lots have worked.

In my first call out of seminary, I was sent to a Chicago neighborhood to be a community minister, bringing church to the people where they were already gathering. In the beginning that meant food and conversation at coffee shops and tea houses. Later we met for seven years in an art gallery, where we developed a

rotational liturgy for Sunday evening gatherings. We use a different style for each week of the month: we call them Holy Conversations, Taizé Vespers, Sacred Meal and Poetry Vespers. During special seasons we sometimes break from this pattern to do communal art projects. We also share a potluck community meal each week. All this gives people multiple ways to engage through the community.

Our worship—which we generally call our “spiritual practice”—makes use of a lot of poetry, which helps people engage the scripture through different lenses. Our music is provided by talented young jazz musicians. Yet we maintain a pretty informal tone, which helps remind us that we’re not coming together to have or make a show; we’re coming together to be in community.



practice together really excites and

What’s been the hardest part of

parish ministry?

When I first began ministry I posed this question to others who were starting new churches and trying to think about church in new ways. Without exception, they all said, “the money.” That’s been true for me, too: one of the hardest challenges is coming up with the funding to continue.

Did you begin with funding from the wider church?

Grace Commons was started as a “parachute drop” new church development. We were fully funded the first year; then each year this funding diminished, and the new

community was expected to begin to replace it. While this is a challenge for every new church, our situation was particularly tough because about a quarter to a third of our young adult community leaves Chicago each year. We've begun to address this by developing partnerships with older, more established churches. We've also learned to acknowledge the special challenges we face precisely because we're successfully engaging a young, transient population.

The other difficult thing for me has been feeling alone as a solo pastor. I've learned that this is common, which is personally reassuring. But it doesn't solve the problem. It doesn't seem healthy that we function in our separate little church silos. I've been thinking about ways that we could be better at sharing people resources in our increasingly networked world.

In some ways, my position has been different from a traditional solo pastorate. There was no preexistent church or model or even method for what I started doing; the whole ministry was improvisational, and that felt especially lonely. As a leader it's tough to improvise on your own—we need others to interact with, to inspire, challenge and encourage us.

How have pastors and others with more experience been helpful? Unhelpful?

A few years ago at a clergy retreat, a retired male pastor told me in a confidential tone that another older male pastor had said that he didn't believe a "girl" could succeed at the ministry I was doing. That was unhelpful. Back at our table in the dining room, I repeated this to the others present. I tried to say it matter-of-factly and without judgment—I simply needed witnesses, and probably a bit of a reality check. A comment like that can knock the wind out of you.

A middle-aged male pastor, who had recently served as the presbytery moderator, responded like this: "Oh, I could never do the ministry that Nanette does. I trust her to do a much better job than I ever could." His affirmation felt like a balm on a sting to the heart. That was helpful.

Others have helped create space for me to do innovative ministry, and they've protected that space when others would have given up on it. I've seen a lot of colleagues around the country lose their ministries because they weren't obtaining "expected" results. The kind of support our ministry has received has allowed us to develop some unexpected results—like the rotational liturgy I mentioned, which

would not have come to life without a years-long incubation process. We had the freedom to fail numerous times before this fruit ripened.

People have been extremely helpful by believing in me and in this ministry project—and by encouraging me to lead.

You recently started pastoring St. James Presbyterian while also staying on at Grace Commons, which now meets at St. James. How did this come about?

I began to explore serving at St. James because I needed to survive financially, and I didn't want to leave Grace Commons—or worse, close the project. As I got to know the people and the spirit of St. James, I began to envision a synergistic relationship. Both communities are relationally warm, theologically open and committed to hospitality and justice. The physical space is also conducive to supporting both ministries; the sanctuary is flexible and intimate. While each community will maintain its identity, they have already begun getting to know each other. We'll be exploring more ways to partner and support each other's ministries.

What do you see as the blessings and challenges of this situation?

I feel truly blessed to have the opportunity to serve these two communities, and the two will bless each other, I'm sure. Grace Commons brings a spirit of innovation alongside the rooted but open and generous community already gathering at St. James. St. James offers stability and hospitality to a more transient, younger group gathering on Sunday nights. I'm excited for this experiment in sharing resources and breaking down the silolike isolation between faith communities. And I'll be changed, I think, by doing the two ministries side by side. How I preach at St. James is affected by how I lead at Grace Commons, and vice versa.

I'll also be challenged to find balance between work and rest. Half-time at two jobs can easily become two full-time jobs. I'm trying to think of it not as having two separate jobs, but rather that I've just doubled the size of my congregation! That's a blessing that would challenge any pastor.

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

Early in my ministry, an older female pastor said, "We need you to lead us." This was very daunting because I felt so young and inexperienced—I felt like I needed her

to lead me! But I took her seriously. I felt charged with a duty in a way, and I think I stood up an inch taller. People need me to lead them, so I have to be brave. I have to take risks on their behalf, even if it draws criticism from others, even if I make mistakes and fail sometimes.

Over time I realized that the people I was reaching out to also needed me to speak their truth, to reflect their experience back to them and to the church—and to make space for them in the Christian conversation.

I also learned some important things about leadership before I became a pastor, in my work as the director of a college-based women's resource center.

Nonhierarchical collaboration and consensus decision making were core values there. As a facilitator and leader, it took me a while to learn that my voice was an equal and important one. My intuition and insight—shared explicitly—were very important in providing leadership, even while I was encouraging and drawing out others' voices. A collaborative, facilitative leader shouldn't be invisible. This is always a balancing act, of course, trying to be neither too controlling nor too passive. I'm still learning about how this balance shifts depending on the situation.

When have you realized that you'd strayed too far in one direction or the other?

Sometimes I can become too enamored with my own ideas and try to make them happen without letting them incubate in the community. The first Taizé service I planned was attended by one person. I knew people would love it, but they weren't ready for it. They didn't really know what it was, and they didn't trust me enough to just show up.

At other times I've tried to allow things to develop more organically, only to find that nothing develops. People get distracted or don't know what to do, or they don't have time to do it. So I need to step in as a more proactive facilitator—to share my ideas, spark conversation and strategize processes to help people achieve our shared goals.

On the basis of your ministry experience so far, how would you want to change—or what would you want to add to—your seminary curriculum?

My studies in theology, history and Bible were essential, but I didn't learn as much about how to apply them in community life. A friend who's a doctor says he started

to feel like a doctor when people started treating him like one. The same is true for me as a minister: it's a developmental unfolding that takes time. Still, I wonder if our field training could become more extensive—and more formative. I think it would have helped me to have more contact with pastors while I was a seminarian.

Could we develop cohorts of pastors to gather at our seminaries for continuing education—but also bring students into those cohorts? The Office of Theology and Worship at the Presbyterian Center in Louisville has been nurturing what it calls “Communities of Theological Friendship.” It could be transformative to bring small groups of pastors and students together in theological friendship.

My lectionary group recently became part of this Presbyterian network. It's a fantastic group. We meet for one week every January. We hire a scholar to teach us in the mornings, present our own biblical studies to each other in the afternoon and have social time in the evenings. It's all the fun of seminary without the pressure of grades—and with the benefit of many years of combined pastoral experience.

How did the group get started?

It was started by a small group of friends just out of seminary. They got a \$25,000 grant to start up; now we pay annual dues and provide financial aid to members as needed. Every year a couple of new people are invited to join as others leave. The friendships that have developed through this group have been very important to me.

This sort of theological friendship is akin to the “spiritual friendship” that I understand my ministry to be—an idea I got from Brian McLaren. Spiritual friendship calls for mutuality, deep authenticity and a good amount of transparency. I know pastors disagree about whether you should be friends with your parishioners. For me, the concept of being a spiritual friend helps define a particular kind of friendship. I don't share all the same things with my closest friends and with those I would consider my spiritual friends. But both kinds of friendship are real.

A seminary president once asked me what my advice would be to people who want more young adults to attend their churches. My response surprised her. I asked, would those same parishioners invite those young adults to dinner in their homes? Do they really want to be brothers and sisters in Christ, or do they just want more consumers of their church programs? My advice is to befriend people. Care about them, and let them care about you.

One of the criticisms churches often receive is that the relationships in them are not real relationships. We can fall into pretending that we've got it together more than we do. Not that we should share every messy detail of our lives—boundaries are good. But where exactly does the boundary fall?

Hearing me talk about my ministry, an older colleague once remarked that I seem to be “so transparent.” He said that when he puts on his robe, he puts on a persona. I understand this. Sometimes we need people to play a certain role in our lives. He plays the role of—I don't know, whatever “pastor” means to the people he's with. Confidant? Comforter? The one with the answers?

But the flip side is that people forget that pastors are human. Early in my ministry, a small group of us were at a coffee shop talking about heaven, hell and the concept of an afterlife. I said, I don't really know what happens to us when we die; it's never happened to me. But here's how I think about it, and here's how other people of faith have thought about it. One young man said, “Wow! I never heard a pastor say, ‘I don't know’ about anything.” He wasn't looking for someone to give him the answers; he was looking for someone who could help him engage the questions.

After a similar conversation, a young woman told me that before our discussions she never knew that Christianity was so dynamic. We then started saying that our community is centered in a dynamic Christianity, one that has always been changing. I think of my work as inviting people into the conversation that Christianity has been since the beginning.

Do you think this dynamism has a distinct flavor today? Is the faith changing in new ways?

I think there's a movement away from faith as intellectual agreement with ideas and toward faith as a way of life. This leaves more room for intellectual diversity and complexity. In part we need to get past the limitations of Enlightenment rationality; that's a distinct challenge in this era.

Also, it's important for the world to see us embrace the faith's history of dynamism. Years ago I walked away from the faith because I grew up believing that there was only one way to be Christian. It was presented to me as a monolithic orthodoxy based on certainty. I have some strong convictions, but that's not the same thing. There is not much in this world about which we can be certain—though it's important that we be clear about our convictions and learn to communicate them well.

What mentors have shaped your understanding of ministry?

Burns Stanfield, my pastor and colleague, taught me by example how to address God as a loving friend while standing in front of the gathered church. I remember the first time I stood next to him behind the communion table. I addressed God with some formal words that I had written down. Burns talked to God like God was right there—and really listening. I realized then why I loved that church and why it had been able to nurture me back into the faith of my childhood.

Do you remember the words he used?

It wasn't so much the words as the tone. He had a conversation with God the way you have a deep conversation with a good friend. Burns had always done that, but standing next to him, trying to do it too, I suddenly understood what was happening. Burns played no small role in helping me to be the pastor I am today, simply by being the pastor he is.

What's your sermon preparation process?

I'm a writer. I like to craft words and mull them over, polishing them. But preaching is different. If I try to write out my sermon word for word, I begin to feel trapped by the words, like I won't break out of them when it comes time to preach them. The thing that needs to be said in the moment is never exactly what I write alone at my desk. And for me at least, speaking is very different from writing. I learned this when I was writing my book. I was writing paragraphs like I would preach them, saying them out loud in my head, repeating phrases too many times for written text.

So I've been learning how to preach from notes instead of a manuscript. Recently I even preached from a "mind map" that I drew out, showing connections between different elements I wanted to touch on.

In the early days of my ministry, I didn't really preach at all. It was always teaching through conversation. Even when we started getting more liturgical, the emphasis was not on a traditional sermon. Over time people wanted me to preach more, so that has been evolving. And now at St. James, I'm entering the preaching task from the other side—beginning with the expectations of a traditional sermon but applying all I've learned from ten years of alternative ministry. At Grace Commons I still put a lot of energy and time into other parts of the liturgy—finding and selecting poetry, developing ideas for using art in worship. That's a different way of preaching the

good news.

How did these shifts toward more attention to liturgy and preaching come about?

As an artist I'm very committed to the aesthetics of spiritual practice. The evolving liturgy came out of these gifts of mine. But I try to create liturgy that will function as shared experience, not performance. It's a fine line, because I am in a sense the artistic director. My capacity to experience prayer while leading prayer depends on my remembering that my role is to talk to God—not to perform something that looks like prayer.

The shift also came from my desire to reclaim and reintroduce liturgy as truly moving, deeply spiritual and transformative. Many of our participants come to us thinking of liturgy as empty ritual. Yet they long for ritual with meaning. So the challenge is discovering the actions, words and aesthetics that will resonate with people and lead them into a transformative experience.

Figuring out the preaching is part of this same process. Teaching through conversation has always been an important part of our community life at Grace Commons. So I've worked hard to figure out how to maintain that relational experience while doing more preaching. I don't try to give people the one key gem or teaching point from a passage of scripture. I'm trying to invite them into active theological reflection on biblical texts and their own lives.

Doug Pagitt talks about progressional dialogue, using provisional statements and assuming that God's truth resides in all people. These assumptions change the relationship between pastors and congregations. To use my own language, this kind of preaching invites people into the dynamic conversation of Christianity.

What does your denominational affiliation mean to you?

Finding a Presbyterian church rooted in love, celebration and service helped me remember, after years of renouncing Christianity, that even the God of Jesus Christ loves me. I was baptized as an adult in that church and ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament there as well.

But that's about a particular congregation manifesting Presbyterianism and Christianity in a particular way. More generally, I appreciate the high value that

Presbyterians place on communal discernment and continual reformation, and I love our emphasis on God's enduring grace and love. Jack Rogers's book *Reading the Bible and the Confessions* documents how Presbyterians have changed our interpretations of scripture as we have grown societally. When I first read this book, it made me proud to be a Presbyterian (and I still am).

Where do you go for renewal?

I am not always good at taking time off, and this will be even more challenging in my new situation. I realize I am breaking one of the Ten Commandments when I don't take time for Sabbath rest—it's right there in the list with murder—but our culture doesn't take this seriously. I try to remind myself that I need to rest not only for my own health and wholeness, but also in order to model this for anyone who looks to me as a spiritual leader. Sometimes that makes it easier to go against cultural norms and honor the Sabbath.

Lately I've been trying to take more time for creativity in cooking good meals for myself. Creative expression is healing for me, and applying that in the kitchen has a double benefit. I also need to immerse myself in nature for renewal. It's easier for me to remember God's presence when I lie down in the grass or stare out at a large body of water. It's good to remember how big the cosmos is and how small I am. It's an essential perspective adjustment that helps me let go of some of the burdens I carry.

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

Grace Commons has been shaped by art. Last Lent, [we created original art for the Stations of the Cross](#), interpreting each piece through the lens of immigration and migration. Recognizing Jesus as a migrant himself—one whose family had to flee from persecution—we looked at the world around us in order to better understand the Jesus story and vice versa. On Palm Sunday we held a vibrant and inspirational art opening. We began with conversations with interfaith guests; later some of the artists reflected on their work. The art remained in the gallery all through Holy Week.

On Easter Sunday, we reflected on how Mary did not recognize Jesus—she thought he was the gardener. Sometimes we do not recognize that which can save us. Sometimes we don't recognize one another for who we really are. We don't

recognize Christ in others, or the image of God in the faces of our neighbors. If we could recognize one another in these deep and real ways, it would go a long way toward building the kingdom of God on earth.

So we created art during worship on Easter day, a large piece with the words “I recognize you” holding central place. During the prayer time, people traced their hands on tissue paper and brought the images forward to be pasted on the art piece. We all placed our hands onto this proclamation as a sign of our commitment to engage, to recognize, to love and to build the kingdom of God here among us.

As we shared communion, people were invited to say “I recognize you” while serving one another. Only a few were brave enough to say the words out loud, but the words were in all our heads. It’s a beginning.