

The pastor with broken wings

By [Dennis Sanders](#)

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One of the things that any pastor of a congregation has to do is visit people where they live. The church I serve has a number of folks who are either in nursing homes or assisted living.

Some pastors love visiting with people. A number of congregations have what are called visitation pastors. These are usually retired pastors who go around visiting the sick and shut-ins. Most of the visitation pastors that I know tend to be rather jovial and extroverted people.

But First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of St. Paul in Mahtomedi, Minnesota, doesn't have a visitation pastor. Correction, it does, and he happens to be me.

Visitation is a challenge for me. I'm autistic. The thought of visiting people makes me nervous for a few reasons: first, I have to engage in small talk, something I don't do well. Second, meeting people is draining on me. I can't explain it, but I expend a lot of energy meeting people. Finally, like many with Asperger's syndrome, I overthink my time with people. I worry that I said the wrong thing even when it looks like I haven't.

As an associate pastor, I rarely did visits. Now as a solo pastor, I have to. I can't tell people that I'm autistic and well, they 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, folks who have lived some damn interesting lives. Even as my eyes are darting around and I count the moments til I can leave, I enjoy getting to know these people.

When I leave, I am thankful to leave. But I am also grateful to have had this time to just talk with this person. I am glad to just be there and hear his or her story.

Being a pastor with autism is definitely not a walk in the park. It's filled with challenges and traps. But you also get to meet people sometimes at their most vulnerable and try to be Christ at that moment.

I think that the Christian life is filled with things we don't want to do, but we do them anyway for the greater glory of God. Autistic Christians have a whole bunch of things they don't want to do, but I think God gives us the strength to do them.

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."

Paul's words also brought to mind the song "[Broken Wings](#)" by Mr. Mister. The song, released in 1985, was pure '80s pop. But the lyrics were captivating. Think of the oddity of flying with broken wings. And yet, there something about those ironic lyrics that talked about grace under pressure. The refrain goes like this:

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

Broken wings. That resonates with me. My broken wings, my thorn is my autism. But the thing is, God is able do mighty things because of my autism—like visiting 90-year-old women.

The Peace Corps had the slogan "The toughest job you'll ever love." When I think about my calling, I have to agree.

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