

## Interview

# David Hansen

By Art Azurdia



*David Hansen has been engaged in pastoral ministry for twenty-nine years. He is the author of four books, including the highly praised The Art Of Pastoring, and twenty-six articles featured in Leadership Journal. Currently serving as Senior Pastor of Kenwood Baptist Church, Dave and his wife, Debbie, are now making their home in Cincinnati, Ohio. Last November we were honored to have Dave at Western Seminary to address **The Spurgeon Fellowship** and lecture in a few classes. He and I sat down for a couple of hours and talked about his experiences in pastoral ministry.*

**Art Azurdia:** How would you measure the present condition of the American evangelical church?

**Dave Hansen:** Pastors who come to hear me speak are coming because they know something about me. They come with a theological seriousness about ministry and preaching. In looking at evangelicalism as a whole, however, I would say that the most significant threat comes from evangelicalism itself.

**AA:** In what form does this express itself?

**DH:** It expresses itself in ministry methods that require no knowledge of theology. They do not depend on the Trinity. They do not depend on any kind of soteriology. They barely even depend on the word of God. You hardly have to have a doctrine of Scripture to operate in these church settings. The seeker churches of today do not really sound any different than the liberal church in which I grew up.

**AA:** Are you referring to the practical outworking of their ministries?

**DH:** Yes, the practical outworking of their ministries and the way the preaching goes. It is all very bland. I think that a lot of the pastors now who are leading seeker churches are evangelical. I just wonder where the second and third generations will go with it.

**AA:** “Deeds, not creeds,” to quote Rick Warren?

**DH:** “Deeds not creeds” was the cry of liberalism infiltrating evangelicalism at the turn of the twentieth century.

**AA:** What does this do to the soul of a pastor? What does adopting a ministry methodology built on management techniques do to the soul of a man who enters ministry wanting to serve Christ with integrity and faithfulness?

**DH:** Well, it strips him of all his confidence. It takes him away from the word. But, you know, it is interesting that P.T. Forsyth (writing at the beginning of the twentieth century) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (writing in the middle of the twentieth century) both say that the busyness of the church is taking pastors away from their real calling. I think pastors wonder what their work actually is. They believe that their work is developing marketing schemes. They believe that it is working on organizing the

church and building up programs. They have a hard time believing that sitting down and looking at the text in the Greek is work. It doesn't seem like work to them and they fear that it does not seem defensible to the congregation. We think that they want us to do work like they do. But I get paid to go out and pray. I get paid to go out and listen to people tell stories. A fellow pastor and I had lunch together recently. When we went to pay the bill, the lady said, "Well, back to work!" I responded, "I don't work!" She asked, "Are you independently wealthy?" I said, "No, I am a pastor." Her eyebrows rose. So I continued, "Well, really what I do is I pray, talk to friends, and read the Bible; that's not work." Many pastors don't realize that their real work is to pray, read, and be with people in times of need.

**AA:** And this is what pastors are neglecting?

**DH:** Well, it is what they think they are not supposed to do.

**AA:** Have you ever faced a real temptation to move away from these convictions? Have you wrestled with this or have you always been resolute in terms of what you think a pastor ought to be and do?

**DH:** Well, at one point I had a crisis of faith. I talk about it in *The Art Of Pastoring*. I lost my faith, my call to ministry, and I was going to become a psychologist. Now that those things are back in order, thanks be to God, I face a temptation unique to what you might call a middle-sized church. It has been very telling to go from small churches to a church of five-hundred. The other day I heard one leader say, "Well, a pastor can be their counselor or their equipper, but he cannot be both." I have really thought about that. This would necessitate dropping the counseling, the calling, the caring about people, and having an open door where people can come and visit with me about their lives. And so I am tempted now in a way I was not tempted before. There are books and articles out there saying that pastors must not do pastoral calling . . . even for pastors of small churches! This is terrible.

**AA:** And substitute it with what?

**DH:** With what they call vision, leadership, and building up the church's program.

**AA:** I frequently hear phrases like "establishing a vision for your ministry," "developing a purpose statement for your church," and "establishing measurable goals." How do these kinds of statements resonate with you?

**DH:** Well, I have no idea how to set measurable goals. I do not have the slightest idea what one would be. For years I have resisted having a vision statement for the churches I pastored. But now I have people in my church, particularly young professionals of large corporations, who do not know how to operate without a vision statement. So I finally gave in. We have a vision statement, but we have not gotten much beyond that. And the vision statement is a good one, but it's not a slogan. Many vision statements now are slogans. We recently went to the South for a family funeral and were driving through Mississippi, the heart of the fundamentalist belt. So many of the churches have slogans such as, "A friendly place to be!" Nothing about Christ or the word was apparent.

**AA:** Do you think some of these ideas grow out of a faulty idea of what success is . . . a defective criteria for measuring success?

**DH:** In my view, a good church is led by the word of God and the Spirit of God . . . the reformation word and Spirit thing. And I see our church growing outward in all directions. I especially love it when I see programs that I did not start. So we have all of these ministries going on, but people sometimes ask, "What is our central direction?" I respond by telling them that we are growing outward. A lot of people, however, want to measure the church by evaluating whether we're going in one particular direction and growing. I have always been staunchly against church growth methods. But you see, in my twenty-one years of ministry before I went to Cincinnati, my churches always grew, so it was easy. Now I am in a church that is not growing. In fact, we have lost a number of

people. So now, you see, the temptation comes. We are not growing numerically. But God is at work! People are becoming Christians, people are being baptized, and children are being dedicated.

**AA:** So do we need to think about growth in different ways?

**DH:** Yes, we need to think about growth in terms of evangelism and discipleship. Those who assess growth solely in terms of numbers are operating on false pretenses. Numerous Christians are leaving churches for other churches where they can get their “fix” on Sunday morning without being known or involved in any manner. Our church is a real body of believers in which people have to be involved because we have a lot of ministry going on.

**AA:** You mentioned, David, that you have been opposed to church growth principles. Could you talk a little about what that means?

**DH:** Well, I am not opposed to common sense. Some church growth principles are just common sense. But I have found that church growth principles are often “reverse engineering,” mirroring what other churches have already done. Church leaders evaluate churches that have experienced numerical growth and formulate principles based on their study. Unfortunately, that does not always work. What’s more, the church growth movement doesn’t keep track of its failures. Church growth methods fail over and over, and pastors are left discouraged and defeated because what they have done does not work. Many of them stake their ministry on the suggestions of the “church growth experts” rather than building their ministries on the word of God. They are failing to confidently exposit the word, the only true means to accomplishing discipleship and creating new followers of Jesus Christ. One of the real challenges to ministry is what I call church pornography. A brochure comes in the mail . . . you open it to find a huge church full of enraptured worshippers . . . and with it a myriad of false promises. Even the infomercials on television admit in small print, “Results not typical.” Church pornography never says that. The fact that most churches may never see the same results is rarely acknowledged and the consequence is often ruined ministries. We are now having a difficult time getting young people to go into the ministry because the church growth movement has so burned out pastoral ministry.

**AA:** The first time we met you said, “This is my philosophy of ministry: I wander around. I wander around the Bible. I wander around with the people of my church. And I wander around with unbelievers. I wander around. That’s what I do.” Of course, this is so profoundly counter-cultural when compared to the dominant CEO paradigm that characterizes so much contemporary ministry. How much attention and effort do you give to being “contemporary” and “relevant?”

**DH:** None whatsoever. Bonhoeffer says that the word of God is relevant without us having to make it relevant. I firmly believe that Christ in the sermon is relevant. The gospel is relevant! That is not to say that we do not need to use language that the world understands. We need to explain Bible stories much more than we used to. Spurgeon could refer to Jethro and even unbelievers knew what he meant. Today we must explain who David was, who Peter was, and that is okay. We can make our sermons more explanatory. To me, that is what it means to be contemporary and relevant. It is simply making sure that we are being clear. But people have left the church saying that I am not relevant enough.

**AA:** So what are they saying? Are they asking you to speak a language they can better understand?

**DH:** No, they understand. I am not complicated in the pulpit. What they mean is that they want topical preaching. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with topical preaching. But they want “relevant topics” that they think their life is really about but they do not really care whether I preach the Bible.

**AA:** Have you ever read a book by Paul Scherer called *The Word God Sent*?

**DH:** No.

**AA:** He talks about this business of being relevant. In summary, he says it is an insult to God to say you have to make the Bible relevant. The Bible *is* relevant, the preacher just needs to show its relevance. A fellow I read recently said that in his view, the number one contributor to exegetical mistakes with the text is the desire to be relevant. It distorts pastors' ability to understand the true meaning of the Scripture.

**DH:** Well, that is the pressure I am under. I am under intense pressure to do that by congregants. I have had people leave the church telling me that they do not want to hear the Bible anymore.

**AA:** Let's shift gears a bit, shall we? If you were given the opportunity to speak to a group of students on the verge of entering pastoral ministry, what advice would you give to them that is indispensable to longevity in ministry?

**DH:** If you cannot preach the text you are going to run out of topics. But if you can preach the text, you are never going to run out of things to preach. The Bible is an anvil that has worn out many hammers. I think pastors need to think theologically in order to be able to save themselves in times of doubt, cynicism, and depression. We need to think about Christ. Our doctrine of the word of God must be central to our ministry. A proper reformation understanding of faith, word, and Spirit is crucial to our ministry. These young pastors must think theologically. They need to read good books. They need to remember their Greek and Hebrew.

**AA:** Who would you encourage young men to read? Who would be good for their souls and for how they think about ministry?

**DH:** Well, I would certainly encourage them to read Eugene Petersen.

**AA:** And, what counsel would you give a pastor who is weary of the demands of ministry and on the verge of giving up?

**DH:** Well, I would dialogue with them to find out where they are at. I would send them to a monastery for a little while to do nothing but think in God's presence and pray. A lot of pastors are lonely but they do not know how to be alone with God. I recently spoke at a Caregiver's Conference in Colorado Springs. There were about fifty people there. All they do is take care of pastors in crisis. What a dear group of people! Some were educated psychologists. Others were former pastors who run retreat centers. I really resonated with them. There is plenty of need for them. Pastors are dying all over the place.

**AA:** I recently read a statistic that said fifteen-hundred pastors in the United States are leaving pastoral ministry every single month for reasons other than retirement or death.

**DH:** Yes, I have heard the same thing. How discouraging that is! I make a priority of meeting with each of my staff members every week and we talk a bit about their ministry and then we talk about their spiritual life. It is important to me that I serve them as a spiritual director and that I provide pastoral care for them. They look forward to meeting with me and I look forward to meeting with them. I love mentoring.