

Daniel Fusco

A LOVE SUPREME—AT STREET LEVEL

INTERVIEW BY PAUL J. PASTOR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT MCFARLAND

Daniel Fusco is lead pastor of Crossroads Church in Vancouver, Washington, and author of several books, including *Honestly: Getting Real About Jesus and Our Messy Lives* (NavPress, 2016) and *Upward, Inward, Outward: Love God, Love Yourself, Love Others* (NavPress, 2017).

At first glance Daniel strikes one as an unusual fit in a suburban megachurch. His long, dreadlocked hair and penchant for dropping obscure jazz references seem out of keeping with the clean-cut image most have for the pastor of a large church. But with Sunday attendance

at Crossroads at about 4,000—not counting weekly viewing of their services online (averaging about 15,000 worldwide)—he is leading his large congregation into a new season of their 40-plus year history, reaching their community with creativity and a spirit of both intentionality and improvisation.

With some avant-garde '70s “loft jazz” playing in the background, Daniel and I sat down over strong coffee to discuss his story, fresh perspectives on how to lead past the false “either/or” choices of ministry, and why our work always comes back to the baptisms.



Let's start with the back story. What's your background?

New Jersey, born and raised. We were all-Italian, culturally Catholic and *loud*. Sunday night dinners roared with grandparents, aunts and uncles, and people who were aunts and uncles—just not by blood. I have great parents, a twin sister and one older sister. So, tons of love and an amazing family unit. Faith really played no part in our lives, though. I'd say we were non-Christian Catholic. Growing up, I had lots of diversity in friendships, which happens when you grow up 40 minutes outside New York. Every tribe, nation and tongue was hanging out together, and for us that was normal.

I was a wild kid. Played music and sports, partied like crazy. By the time I went to college at Rutgers, I looked around and started to realize that people were getting spiritual, and I thought, *Well, since everyone is spiritual, I'm not spiritual*. Mostly to be contrary.

What do you mean, "getting spiritual"?

I saw friends go into that searching phase of college—reading up on Buddhism, arguing through World Religions 101. My first response was "Man, I'm not spiritual. I'm just *human*." I liked getting high, casual relationships with girls, jazz. Then my mom got cancer. That marked the beginning of my own search.

A couple friends who'd become followers of Jesus started to talk to me. I took a philosophy class, which was eye-opening. And I started asking questions. I realized that the philosopher's question is always "*Why?*" Everything begins with *why*. But I had been such an in-the-moment kind of person, I'd never stopped to ask it. My life was all *what* questions: "What are we going to do next?" "What's for dinner?" "What's fun?"

"Why?" began to get traction, and my own searching started. An important step came in a Religions of the Western World class. The professor was clergy—a "reverend doctor"—but it seemed like his goal was undermining faith in Jesus. I started to challenge him, thinking, *You're a pastor, but you really don't like Jesus*

very much!

I always felt that the best musicians are divisive: People either love or hate their work. Great artists draw a line, and you're either on one side or the other. I saw that there must be something about Jesus I didn't know about.

The big break came in my junior year. I had a professor who I realize now was a born-again believer. He was just *different*. There was a kindness to him along with a real humanity. He connected with people. In those days, I had a habit of oversleeping through exams, then, because I'm socially graced, talking my way into making them up later.

When I did that in his class, something new happened. He said yes, but then followed it up: "Can I ask a question?" he said. "You always look high, you show up to class regularly, but late. You seem bored, but then you're getting A's on papers, and even though you oversleep your exams, you tend to ace them. What's your story?" I was there to schmooze him. He was asking who I was.

During this conversation, he asked, "What do you like to read?" And I started talking—Buddhism, Hare Krishna literature (I hung out with them for the free vegetarian meals), stories about ayahuasca vision quests and stuff like that.

"Have you ever thought about Jesus?"

"Well, yeah. But no."

"Do you believe Jesus was a spiritual teacher?"

"Yeah! I mean some people do."

"Do you believe the Bible is a spiritual book?"

"Uhhh ... yeah?"

"Then I don't think you're being an intellectually honest seeker unless you read it."

Pow. He was right. That was how I started reading the Bible. A year later, while reading Matthew, Jesus revealed himself to me in a really personal way. This was April 1998. I had graduated college and was pursuing a career in music, reading the Bible, growing in my faith and seeking the Lord. And as I connected more to

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church, I felt called to ministry.

Then things moved quickly. Before Crossroads, my ministry history looks like this: apprenticing for ministry in California's Bay Area, returning to New Jersey to plant a church, then moving back to the Bay Area to plant two churches simultaneously. After that, I was invited to come to Crossroads.

Describe Crossroads. What was the church you came to?

Crossroads was founded in October of '75, two months before I was born. It's a first-generation megachurch. They had 350 people on the first day and almost 1,000 people by the end of their first year. From a growth perspective, it had plateaued in the early 2000s and was beginning to decline in terms of attendance.

When I arrived, it was still very large. Bill Ritchie, the founding pastor, is an extraordinary teacher, worship was great and the Sunday experience was remarkable. Bill had been on the radio in this area for 30 years, and his teaching ministry was incredible. But other aspects of the church's ministry, particularly discipleship, were sagging, and it felt like the church was declining.

A church will always eventually revert to the size it can sustain. Structurally speaking, for Crossroads to support the size that it had achieved, it needed its infrastructure to be overhauled with an eye toward making a bunch of new converts—not just drawing Christians from other churches—and discipling them. I worked to relay the foundation in the first three years, mostly overhauling infrastructure.

As a church planter you put a culture in place. But inheriting a church that had been planted 40 years before, you don't have a clean slate. A good visual example was the church's employee manual. It was *huge*. Instead of being rewritten, staff had added addendum after addendum, until it was about the size of a dictionary. It didn't need more addendums, it needed a revision.

So we reset nearly everything. We asked basic ques-

tions: Is everything where it's supposed to be? Are people in areas of giftings and passions? Are this generation's needs being met?

OK. But what convinced you Crossroads was a personal fit? You're a jazz musician/dreadlocked church planter. This is a suburban megachurch. It seems a little like a buccaneer signing on to captain a cruise ship.

When I was in the Bay area, I started two churches at the same time. I didn't want to multisite them, be-

cause one was in Marin County and the other was in San Francisco. Those are *not* the same. I couldn't pretend they were. When I was ready to turn those over for a new chapter of ministry, I felt that God was saying, *Daniel, I want you to walk by faith*. I assumed that meant planting another church because that's what I knew. I'd planted three and coached lots of people.

So when Bill reached out to me, my first thought was exactly that: *I'm not a megachurch pastor*. There's a

way most pastors of large churches are. I know I'm not that guy. They seem like regal statesmen. I feel like the regal statesman's crazy nephew who everybody hopes doesn't get arrested. *[Laughs]*

But I realized that planting a church wasn't a step of faith for me anymore, it was a step of sight. I was good at it. I liked it. My family was geared for it. God wanted to put me in a place where I had to rely on him. I began to seriously consider the invitation. At one point, one of my good buddies offered his opinion. "Don't do it," he said. "They're going to hate you." Another friend said, "Man, they *invented* the interim pastor role for whoever succeeds Bill Ritchie at Crossroads." Bill even wanted to stay at the church after the transition. So not only would I be the guy coming after the hugely successful founding pastor of 40 years, the founding pastor stays as part of the church? It was all so insane. But I was like, *That sounds awesome*. I guess I'm a glutton for punishment.

Honestly, I was tired of hearing how these transitions

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and successions always fail. And my generation needs to learn how to do it well. I started thinking, *Maybe I can be part of a transition that works.*

It all added up, and I said “Yes.”

From the outside, it seems like the succession was a resounding success.

It was extraordinary. What God did was miraculous. We actually *grew* in the transition.

When we designed the transition, we designed it to not kill a great church. But what we didn’t realize

was that God wanted to reach a whole new set of people right away. Sure, some people left—they weren’t going to let “the dreadlock guy” be their pastor. But others poured in. So many people started coming. The unchurched. The dechurched. People who’d grown up at Crossroads, had gotten away from the Lord, but heard from parents or grandparents: “You should come check out Crossroads, we have a new pastor.” People got saved, rededicated their lives to Jesus. The older

generation here often was unsure about what we were doing, but they couldn’t argue with the fact that God was working, that they were sitting in the pews with their grandkids and seeing them get excited about the Bible. In five years, we’ve almost doubled in size. Praise God.

What’s one must-say thing about succession you’d share?

Seventy-five percent of the success of the succession is in the hands of the outgoing pastor. They’re the ones with buy-in. I am so grateful—God had given Bill a vision and Bill was committed to it. He even told me, “My legacy as a pastor is tied to how well we do this.”

Bill and I made a commitment: We were going to guard our relationship above all. We agreed that, like a married couple, we’d disagree in private and stand together in public. By and large, we did that. There were times when things were choppy: We’re both Type-A leaders. I’m younger than his youngest child and so

have different perspectives. I’ll never have the longevity or the history here that he has had. I have made some decisions he told me would never work. Sometimes he was right. I never felt I was supposed to replace Bill. I felt my job was to honor him.

Describe your ministry context.

Vancouver, Washington, is the northern neighbor of Portland, Oregon, right over the Columbia River. Portland is probably the most liberal city in America by pretty much any metric. Vancouver is where our

main campus is, though we do have a campus in Southwest Portland that’s doing well. Like Portland, Vancouver is probably 65 percent hyperliberal and 35 percent the exact opposite: 4x4 trucks and gun racks. It’s your quintessential never-been-Christian context, with lots of post-Christians from around the country who have moved here.

Crossroads is a real cross section of where we live. There are people in their 90s, who’ve been walking with Je-

sus twice as long as I’ve been alive. There are kids with tattoos. Married, single, divorced. Our county is 94 percent Caucasian, but we’re very multiethnic. There are long-term Christians, and people who just chose to follow Jesus last week—or today. We’ve had to designate an outdoor smoking area, which speaks to the fact that we’re reaching people where they are. It’s a beautiful mass of humanity.

Crossroads also has a significant digital ministry. What are you learning about doing church online?

Our internet campus is our largest. We serve about 15,000 people a weekend on our internet campus as our services are happening. At the end of every day they’ll take a picture of the map of the world, showing where people tuned into Crossroads from. People watch and connect from all over the globe—on pretty much every continent, and all through the 10/40 window. We’re reaching the world from Vancouver, by the thousands.

Look, I’m married with three kids. My wife’s only

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making it to church twice a month because ... *there are three kids*. One of them is *always* sick! The numbers say that the average person goes to church 1.8 times per month. And when they're not there, it's not always for the reasons we think. By taking what we're doing and putting it on the internet campus, our people can join us even when they're traveling, on vacation or whatever.

What we didn't realize is that it would also be the single greatest feeder for Crossroads. I meet people every week who join us in person but first "met" us online, connecting with our volunteers who message them or call them. In another generation, this was radio. Then it was TV. Now it's the internet.

Walking around your offices, I see "Jesus is real," printed everywhere. Tell me about it?

Every teacher has a core message, the one thing that really grabs you. If I had to give one last sermon, it would be: "Jesus is *real*." He is right where you are. Jesus lives at street level. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," or like Eugene Peterson interpreted it, he "moved into the neighborhood." It's the incarnation. "Jesus is for real" is our core language. I like it because there's nothing sexy about it. It's terse.

The incarnation is the jewel of our theology. But how does that work itself into the values, goals and strategies of a megachurch?

We need to reject false dichotomies. Does a church really have to be attractional or missional? We are both, and it seems to be working. Evangelism or discipleship? No, we do both. Kids ministry: Do you have to choose between fun or biblical? No.

Our mission is to simply respond to Jesus. Every moment there's an invitation for us to respond. Our vision is simple: Because Jesus is real, we're a family of faith, fully engaged,

transforming our community and our world. Put Jesus at the top—he's the why. Because of who he is, we're a family. So, we're trying to become a family that works.

As a megachurch, everyone expects us to be kind of vanilla. But Crossroads is rigorously biblical. Like, we'll teach Leviticus. The Gospel's got teeth. We'll let it hurt a little bit. Repentance is the first word of the gospel.

The false dichotomies that we come to expect in ministry are huge. We do altar calls every Sunday. People get saved. *Every Sunday*. Why would that detract from service to our community? That whole dichotomy that there are "cross-centered" churches and "kingdom-centered" churches is false. We're going to serve the community in its place of pain in the name of Jesus, all day every day. And when someone comes to Crossroads, they're going to hear about the cross of Jesus Christ and the finished work of what he's done.

You're a jazz musician. How does that influence your thinking as a pastor?

A classical musician has a written sheet of music, and they play it perfectly. Their creativity comes in through the expression—the nuances that they put in. But it's all written beforehand. A jazz musician learns how to deconstruct a song. Not only do they play it uniquely every time, but they respond to the dynamics of the moment. Still, there must be rigorous intentionality. Jazz musicians don't just play random notes. That's not music, it's just noise. There must be incredible mastery of technique and theory to be proficient in jazz. It doesn't happen on its own.

As a ministry, we're not married to our methods. In a given moment, we can adjust, given the unique influences and pressures of the moment. We try to pay attention to our language and habits. All that is jazz.

When you do that, you realize, *Man, this is hard!* I get why people

are willing to pigeon-hole themselves. Trying to have a church for everyone forces us to think. How do you talk about what this is in a way that makes sense, both for the mature Christian and for the new believer, and for everyone in between? We must be intentional and engaged with who is really in front of us—not the church we think we have, but the church we really have.

Jesus accepts all of us where we are and leads us through transformation. We feel as a church that we must do the same thing: meet people where they are. We don't adjust the message, but we acknowledge the landmines among our mixed multitude, and seek to navigate people through them.

You were well set up for that ministry philosophy, by personality and background. Where does a pastor start in building those skills to move past false dichotomies in ministry?

It's all about connection. You *must* know people outside the faith. Often pastors must work to do that. Go to your local coffee shop or wherever it is that people gather. Read the newspaper and sit. Participate. Become a regular. Same places, same times, and you'll start seeing the same people. Talk to them.

Communication starts with understanding. The best way to counteract cultural beliefs that are not biblical is to understand others. *What's driving this?* That's the question. *Why does the church fail to communicate here?*

If somebody comes up to me and is aggressive, dismissive or condescending, I don't want to spend time with them. The church has done a poor job in reaching the lost because frankly we have a hard time putting ourselves in someone else's shoes. When you are connected relationally to people who think differently, you speak with more empathy. There's a reasonableness, a nuance. **That reminds me of the theme of your book *Honestly*.**

"Out of 300 million people in America, there's 240 million non-evangelical people. Let's focus on them. When they come to Christ, let's figure out how to disciple them and employ them in the work of the kingdom."

Yeah. *Honestly: Getting Real About Jesus and Our Messy Lives*. I took the book of Ephesians and started with two truths: that life is messy and that Jesus is real. The apostle Paul wrote every one of his letters because a church was messy. He was trying to help put things in order. The church in Corinth, for example: spiritually gifted but *messy*.

In *Honestly*, I took the book of Ephesians, and then I overlaid John Coltrane's classic album about God's love titled, *A Love Supreme*. The two fit together perfectly, in four movements taken straight from Coltrane's four tracks: "Acknowledge-

ment," "Resolution," "Pursuance" and "Psalm."

My newest book is *Upward, Inward and Outward*. I took the Greatest Commandment and deconstructed it. We live *upward* as we're loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind—and that includes faith. *Inward* is loving our neighbor "as we love ourselves." We need that inner focus on ethics and inner life to get right before turning our attention elsewhere. *Outward* is obviously loving your neighbor. We must all live in three directions. Everyone has upward beliefs that lead to the way they see themselves, which lead to the way they treat people in the world.

As a veteran church planter, now at a megachurch, what would you say to pastors planting or revitalizing churches?

Statistically, the number of churches in America is increasing. But the number of Christians is decreasing. Let that sink in.

Here's the point: We should not be impressed with attendance numbers. We should be impressed with baptism numbers. Most successful church plants are just church moves. Or worse, church splits. A church will go into a new area and have a thousand people after a few years and be hailed as successful. But how many

baptisms did they have? “We had 40!” No, that’s not a church plant.

So many churches seem to be trying to reach the reached. Christians are trying to filet fish that have been caught for years. But the fields are white. Instead of fishing in the trout farm pond that they stock so you can catch a lot of them—all mangled up from being caught a thousand times—let’s get in a boat. Let’s go out in the deep blue sea with a heavy line and go reach lost people.

I’m not impressed by how many people you preach to.

I’m impressed by baptisms. If your growth is tied to baptisms, you’re a successful church, whether large, or small or a church plant. But if no one’s getting saved, you’re just collecting believers that have already been caught. And in most cases, they should probably go back to the church they came from.

Pastors, we need more than a ministry of maintenance. But sure, it’s messy if you reach lost people. It was amazing when we had to put in a designated smoking area here at Crossroads. We meet them where they are. Here’s what happened: We took a church that was a well-established megachurch, and we made it “unsafe” for people. There is nothing easy about it. People show up with cigarettes and need a spot to smoke them. They show up dressed “inappropriately” for a house of worship. We’ve had to pull visiting kids out of cars half-naked at youth group. That’s real life. That’s real ministry.

If all your kids are grown up, your house is neat and safe. But if you have babies, you’ve got dirty diapers. You gotta put locks back on the cabinets. You gotta put foam on the sharp corners. You can’t just check out and watch TV for four hours. Is it an inconvenience? Yes. But is it a *beautiful* inconvenience because you’ve got a baby in the house! Absolutely. As a solid grounded believer, Crossroads is going to inconvenience you be-

cause we’ve got so many babies. But you’re supposed to be here to raise them. That’s your job. Maybe you’ve gotten used to not raising them, and being the one who’s being catered to, but you’ll never grow when you’re an adult being catered to. You grow when you begin to help other people.

We have hundreds of amazing rock-solid believers who are now on mission discipling a whole new generation of believers. And what’s funny is they’re like, “I forgot that people did this for me when I was a baby.”

Out of 300 million people in America, there are 240

million non-evangelical people. Let’s focus on them. When they come to Christ, let’s figure out how to disciple them and employ them in the work of the kingdom. That mission is for all of us, church planters or pastors. There are way more people outside the church than inside the church.

Sounds like that loud and loving Italian family you grew up in.

Ha! Totally. Total happy chaos.

We were laughing the other day, because a husband and wife, totally hammered, came to church for the first time, and started fighting in the middle of our “family room.” A couple

of our pastors had to go calm them down. They ended up calmer, saying, “We love this place!”

And I think, *Me too. I love this place too.* Because Jesus is real, and Jesus is at street level, and street level is here.

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For more: CrossroadsChurch.net, DanielFusco.com, [@DanielFusco](https://twitter.com/DanielFusco)

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