



## Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

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### Episode 001: Rebuilding Trust

The Rev. Dan Handschy, rector of Advent Episcopal Church in Crestwood, MO

The Rev. Harry Leip, deacon, Trinity Episcopal Church, CWE, St. Louis

Dan Handschy: When I arrived at Church of the Advent, I came into a situation in which the previous rector had been dismissed for sexual misconduct, and so I found a congregation in disarray and kind of hurting. We had to reconsider what it meant to be church, which gave us a real opportunity to do things in new ways.

Harry Leip: Welcome to JesusHacked, the weekly podcast on storytelling faith. I'm Harry Leip, deacon at Trinity Episcopal Church in the central west end of St. Louis. As many of you can imagine, when trust in a church community is compromised or even shattered, there are many ways a church community can respond, both in healthy and unhealthy ways. For today's conversation, we're talking about rebuilding trust in an actual community with the Reverend Dan Handschy, the rector of the Church of the Advent in Crestwood, Missouri, a western suburb of St. Louis County.

Welcome to the podcast, Dan.

Dan Handschy: Thank you.

Harry Leip: Obviously, you've got a pretty big story to tell, so I'll let you step into it because I know all this happened that you're going to share with us before you were called. Sort of before the curtain rose for your arrival here, this all happened, so can you give us an idea of what you walked into?

Dan Handschy: My predecessor had been here for 14 years. He was very well-liked. People who knew him well said that when he was with you, his full attention was on you, and so he was very well-liked. He had been counseling a couple that was divorcing, and before the divorce was final, he began dating the wife. The husband of the couple sued the diocese for malpractice, and the bishop then had to come and intervene and invited Fred to go off for some rehabilitation counseling, which he did not participate with. It was a very messy situation. The congregation thought he might come back, and then he didn't.

Before I interviewed with the congregation, with the search committee, the canon to the ordinary let me know what was going on and gave me the opportunity of backing out at that point. I said, "No, I think this would be a really interesting interview." I was very interested in serving in a congregation that understood its own need of healing, its own need of God's presence, and this seemed like that kind of situation, so I came and I interviewed. The interview went really well. We started right out at the beginning of the interview with those facts and kind of asked the question, where would we go from here.

Harry Leip: Dan, since it sounds like you were fully aware of the situation when you came for a face-to-face conversation, how did that feel knowing that some significant trust had been violated and you were considering stepping into a community that was, just say, was broken and wounded?

Dan Handschy: Good question. I had put on my CDO profile in my personal statement that I longed to be priest with a community honest with itself about its desire for God. My thought was if they knew that trust had been broken and they were ready to rebuild it, that would be an opportunity to get to that kind of honesty. If they were wanting to sweep it under the rug and pretend everything was okay, then it was clearly a no-go. It was very clear early in that interview that this was a group of people ... At least the search committee was a group of people that had faced those facts, wanted to go on in new ways, and so I saw that as a real opportunity to come in and just start right from the beginning to build a kind of trust, to reestablish what it meant to be church.

Harry Leip: When you came for your first face-to-face meeting with this group, I'm curious, did they sort of weave it into the conversation? Did you begin asking questions, or did you bring that up at the beginning of that conversation, since it was sort of the elephant lurking in the room, I'm imagining?

Dan Handschy: I can't remember who brought it up. I remember that I had been out to dinner with the canon to the ordinary, and he told me. I don't know if I brought it up or if they brought it up, but the search committee told me that they had spent a good chunk of their time together very simply processing what had happened, asking, "How did we get here? What's been broken? Where do we need to go from here?" That was really the substance of that search committee interview.

They were asking me, "So, how would you take us to that place?" I said, "We just have to reestablish trust. We have to be really honest with each other, tell each other everything that's going on. We just have to have enough time with each other to know that we can trust," and that that was where I was going to begin. I said I didn't have a magic bullet, didn't know what that was going to look like, but we were just going to have to have that kind of communication parish-wide to begin to build that trust.

Harry Leip: There's a great story that I know you've shared, and perhaps you can step into it a bit, of how you modeled that honesty and quite bravely, as the story goes, in your initial sermon on your first Sunday. If you could take us there just for a brief moment. I think that's such a great modeling of the honesty that you were sharing with the community.

Dan Handschy: It's one of the few sermons that I can remember very distinctly. It was before Advent, and the passage is in Luke of Jesus walking through the temple with his disciples, and they're admiring the beautiful stones, and he says, "The time is coming when not one stone will be left on another, and many will come in my name saying, 'I am he.' Don't be deceived. It's not ..."

I stood there in the pulpit, and I said, "So I know that your previous rector was dismissed for sexual misconduct, and now you know I know, and so we're standing in the ruins of the temple and we have to test the stones and figure out which ones are worth using again in the rebuilding. Many of you are sitting out there pointing at me and saying, 'He's the savior. He's going to make it all okay.' I am not. We're here because we depend upon God, and if we can't get back to that basis, that foundation, the temple that we rebuild will mean nothing."

I like to tell the story. My recollection is wrong. I've gone back and checked the books, but there were 120 people in church on that first Sunday, and as I recall it, there were 90 the next. Now it took more than a week, but the folks who did not want to have to deal with that simply stopped coming. I had people come to me in coffee hour and say, "Why do you have to do this in the pulpit? Why do you have to do this in the liturgy?" I said, "Because it's not real if we don't do it there, and we can't pretend it didn't happen," and those people just found other places to go.

Harry Leip: Right. You know, Dan, listening to your story, it's probably speaking the obvious, but it sounds like to tell the truth in community can be a bit risky.

Dan Handschy: It was very risky for us. The vestry and I couldn't get together. I kept pushing them to come up with a vision, and they wouldn't do it. Finally, they said, "We want to know what your vision is," and I said, "Okay, let's talk about that." Somebody said, "Fred's vision," my predecessor, "understood the church as a wheel with himself as the hub and then the chair people of the various committees as the spokes going out to the hub."

I said, "Oh, okay, I got it now." Said, "This is a perfect situation for secret-keeping and siloing." I said, "My vision is that we're all standing around the altar. I happen to be the person behind the altar, but we're all on the rim of that wheel together and Christ is at the center, and we need to learn how to communicate with each other." Because of the way he had done it, these people that he considered the spokes had become very instrumental within the community and threw a lot more weight than they should have.

For instance, the guy who did property, he was the only guy who could do property correctly, but he loved to complain about how he was the only one who ever did anything, and if the doorknob wasn't working, he had to come and fix it. The pre-school director wanted some bulletin boards put up, and I did not want to call this guy and have to have him complain about having to put ... So I just put them up. He came in on Sunday and said, "Who did that?" I said, "I did," and he stormed out and he never came back.

We were having a vestry retreat, and people said, "What are we going to do about the building?" I said, "What do you mean what are we going to do about the building?" They said, "Well, Glen's not here. We can't ..." I said, "Glen's not here to tell us how to do it. We can do it however we want," and a light bulb went off for the vestry. They were like, "Oh, we're the responsible party here. We don't have to wait for somebody else's approval. We can make our own decisions." That was the beginning of trying to figure out how we were going to do things.

Harry Leip: Yeah. I like that. At least I'm hearing this connection between telling the truth and telling your story, and structure is rearranging where you don't have sort of what I would see as sort of centralized power or power in a few hands. Instead, I really like that image, and that's very re-visioning that everyone's on the peripheral of the wheel looking inward to Jesus.

Dan Handschy: That first year, maybe year and a half, maybe even two years, I think I preached the same sermon over and over and over again. The sermon that I preached is that there's only one reason to come to church, and that's to encounter God. You may say you're coming because your friends are here, but you could meet your friends other places. People coming through the back door for the first time may say that they're coming for a moral education for their kids. They could go to the YMCA for that. Their only reason to be here is to encounter God, and so we have to strip away everything else. The power that people want to throw

around the church, that's not why we're here. I wanted it to be very clear that I was basing my authority on the foundation of the community.

Harry Leip: That sounds so simple, but I think in a lot of places, that's pretty radical, radical rearranging to say, like you were saying, what is truly important about church and community. The Episcopal Church loves music, and we love our liturgy and patterns and there's so many different reasons, but to distill it down I think is both a bit profound in its simplicity, but how much that can take us by surprise, especially as we start looking at the Jesus movement where we're sort of hopefully refocusing ourselves into that. That's such a interesting image.

Dan Handschy: Another thing that happened that kind of gets to that point is my first Sunday here ... I had promised the search committee, absolute, on my mother's grave, that I would not make any liturgical changes-

Harry Leip: Ah, okay.

Dan Handschy: ... without lots of instruction. My first Sunday after the confession, I stood up and invited them to stand, and I said, "The peace of the Lord be always with you," and was met with silence.

Harry Leip: Really?

Dan Handschy: They said to me, "You promised you weren't going to change anything," and I said, "What did I change?" They said, "We've never exchanged the peace before." I said, "Oh."

Harry Leip: Remind us, what year was this, about?

Dan Handschy: This is 1992.

Harry Leip: Ah, interesting. Okay.

Dan Handschy: I began to talk to them about the peace coming at the confession, because what we're offering when we make our offering is the life of the community. I went back to that passage in Matthew where, "If you remember that your brother has something against you, go and be reconciled." I said, "So we have to make sure that the life we're getting ready to lay on the altar, the common life we're getting ready to lay on the altar, is worth putting on the altar."

That was so hard for people to understand. That's the radical piece, that's the shift, but that's what's taking root now, is that we understand that what we're doing is putting our common life as the body of Christ on the altar and asking God to bless that. We can have any kind of fight you can imagine in the vestry room as long as we can share peace and put our lives on the altar in the church.

Harry Leip: That, to me, sounds transformational. I want to telescope it and bring it now, early '90s, to where we're at now. In my mind, those are some pretty important, profound seeds that you sowed with the community struggling with rebuilding trust, and now you're many years later. Can you still see that-

Dan Handschy: Yeah.

Harry Leip: ... that trust, that truth-telling sort of continuing to work itself into the DNA of this community that you lead?

Dan Handschy: One of the first things that happened was I came to church one Sunday and people said to me, "Why didn't you visit Tom in the hospital?" I threw my sermon away that day and said, "This will never happen again. I would rather get a phone call from everyone in the directory than one person asking me why I didn't visit somebody in the hospital, because what we're about is this common life."

We now have kind of a little code word that's ... We have a rule of life, and one of the points we sum up is "we're going to be in your business," and people will tell you if we find out after the fact that you've been in the hospital, we're going to be pissed because we haven't had the chance to be church to you.

Harry Leip: Can you say that one more time? The community is going to be in your ...

Dan Handschy: We're going to be in your business.

Harry Leip: Quite the tagline.

Dan Handschy: Right. We toyed with that being our tagline, but if we find out that you're going off for surgery and we haven't had a chance to pray, then we feel like we haven't been community to you. That comes from those first years of understanding that what we're offering is the life of the community, and if we don't know what that life looks like, then we don't know what we're offering. It's important to us when we make our prayers, when we make our offerings, to be able to offer ...

Another thing that we do is when a family member of someone in the church has died, we remember them in the prayers of the people for a year. The first couple of times we did it, people said, "I don't want you to do that. It's too uncomfortable," and we said, "Precisely." You haven't grieved yet. That's why it's uncomfortable, and so we're going to do this. It's noticeable when a name rolls off the end of the list, people will go to that person and say, "I didn't hear your brother's name this week." That means it's been a year. It's interesting to see how that ministry happens, not by me, but by the community to itself, because what we're offering is that life.

Harry Leip: It sounds like that has become part of the community's DNA, because I'm hearing that this journey has been quite transformative going from

secrets and distrust into a community that's open and honest and trusting.

Dan Handschy: In your business.

Harry Leip: In your business, which to me, to use a corporate word, but I think and also what's here is there seems to be some accountability-

Dan Handschy: Oh, great.

Harry Leip: ... of the community itself.

Dan Handschy: Oh, absolutely. Good way of putting it, right? Because it's not just me that's going to be mad at you if we find out that you've been in the hospital and we didn't know it. It's everybody. You have to be part of this life. Now if somebody just wants to come on Sundays and doesn't want to move into that level of membership, we're perfectly fine with that, but if you want to know how do I get into the center of the life of the community, it's that accountability. It's that understanding that we're offering this common life, that you have to be part of this common life to be offered, that you have to be willing to have a little trust in us so that you can put those things out there that need offering and need healing so that we ...

The community feels like it hasn't had the chance to be church if we don't know those things. People will show up. We have a call list, the vestry call list, and I call the senior warden, and the senior warden calls everybody on the vestry for those crucial pastoral moments, somebody's died. I've called the senior warden on my way to the hospital when somebody has been taken there with very serious problems and arrived to find other parishioners ahead of me.

Harry Leip: Wow.

Dan Handschy: The phone calls have been made and other people have showed up before I got there.

Harry Leip: That sounds like true community empowerment to me that some communities would just love to have.

Dan Handschy: It's amazing. When you're going into an ICU with someone who's just thrown an aortal aneurysm and you don't know whether they're going to live or not, and you're the pastor and you don't know what to say, it's amazing to know that there's four or five people in the waiting room saying prayers to hold you up for whatever it is you have to tell the family and that those four or five got to the waiting room within five or 10 minutes of when you arrive. No question, there was one where a teenager told their mom, "We're going to the hospital because this was my Sunday School teacher, and, no, we're not sitting at home."

Harry Leip: That's great.

Dan Handschy: It's like, wow. Wow. Yeah, it's transformational. It requires commitment. You can't walk in and think, "Oh, this is just a fun thing we do on Sunday." We're going to be in your business. We're going to expect the commitment from you, and return it, right?

Harry Leip: Of course. Let me leave you with one last question, and appreciating that our time is growing short and I'm sure you could take this an hour into it. With looking back at this, again, journey, both you and the community, where have you seen Jesus operating? Because there's so many people, so much going on in the community, how have you seen Jesus journeying with you, journeying with the community through this process in either small ways or large ways?

Dan Handschy: That question brings it back kind of personal. I've been here now 24, going on 25 years. About my sixth or seventh year, I was starting to get bored and thought, "Well, maybe it's time to go find something else." The senior warden came to me and said, "Yeah, we can tell you're getting kind of bored. What would it take to keep you?" After several years of conversation, what we finally settled on was that I would go back to school for a PhD.

Where I've seen Jesus in this is that if I was a minister doing all of the ministry, I would have burned out long ago, but the congregation ... Christ is the minister here. The body ministers to itself and to me. We renegotiated my letter of agreement after the PhD, or when I was getting the PhD, and the community said there were five things I was responsible for, and the fifth one was my own intellectual life. They pay me for that, because it benefits me and, therefore, benefits them.

Harry Leip: Right.

Dan Handschy: That kind of mutuality is where I see Jesus. When I hear colleagues talk about how much energy they pour into their congregations and how burned out they feel, it's like something isn't right, because you should be getting a charge out of this and be fed by this life as much as you're doing the feeding.

Harry Leip: Absolutely. Great. Dan, thank you for this conversation. I think it was great for me, and I'm sure it will be wonderful for our listeners.

Dan Handschy: Thank you.