

# Tommy Sanders: Follower of Christ, dad, husband, teacher

February 20, 2020

Tommy Sanders is provost and vice president of academic affairs at [East Texas Baptist University](#) in Marshall, Texas, and has served ETBU since 2013. He is a member of Port Caddo Baptist Church in Marshall. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on Christian higher education. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated leader to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

## Background

### Where else have you served, and what were your positions there?

- Director of Master of Arts in Children's Ministry and Master of Arts in Family Ministry, Dallas Baptist University
- Minister of childhood education, Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas
- Director of childhood ministry publishing, LifeWay Christian Resources, Nashville
- Minister of childhood education, Hyde Park, Baptist Church, Austin
- Minister to preschoolers and their families, First Baptist Church, Waco
- Minister of youth and children, First Baptist Church, Hewitt
- Minister of youth, Calvary Baptist Church, Waco

### Where did you grow up?

Vicksburg, Miss.

## **How did you come to faith in Christ?**

I was 14 and accepted Christ after a youth revival in my church. Shortly after that, I felt the call into ministry.

I was a member of a small church and a small association. I began speaking in our church and in other small churches in the area. Because I had the gift of teaching, folks assumed I would be a pastor but much of that was due only to a few churches in our association having more than a full-time pastor. It was the assumption by most that this was the path for me.

I often tell students that knowledge and experience precede a call. God continues to use new experiences and knowledge to shape my call.

## **Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?**

- Bachelor of Arts in Religion, Baylor University
- Master of Arts in Religious Education, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
- Ph.D. in Leadership Studies, Dallas Baptist University. I was their first Ph.D. graduate.

## **About education**

### **Why do you feel called into education?**

Other than titles like “follower of Christ,” “Dad” and “Husband,” the title I feel most characterizes me is the word “teacher.” From my earliest memories, school teachers as early as junior high and at church have recognized this in me. For me, the best definition of education, teaching and learning is change—change in knowledge, change in heart and change in life. Seeing learners making these changes is an exciting process.

## **How does being a Christian influence your work in education?**

We talk about the integration of biblical faith and learning a great deal at ETBU. We believe in order for students to see they can integrate faith into their careers, they first must see it demonstrated by Christian faculty in and beyond the classroom.

When I say “biblical integration of faith,” I mean more than prayer and a devotion. These activities may or not be integration. Integration is when we take what we are teaching that day and we make a connection with a biblical principle.

## **What is your favorite aspect of education? Why?**

Christian higher education has two powerful tools at its disposal—education and the gospel. These are two of the most powerful tools for change.

ETBU has a high percentage of first-generation students, maybe the highest of all traditional Baptist schools in Texas. When I see a first-generation student walk across the stage at commencement, I think about all the potential, not only for this student, but for his or her family and for the kingdom.

## **What is your favorite class to teach? Why?**

Principles of Christian Teaching. While I am the provost and vice president for academic affairs, I typically teach at least one and usually two classes a semester. I love Principles of Christian Teaching because it allows me to share what I know about teaching and curriculum development to students. I am very passionate about teaching and this is the best platform to share my knowledge and experience in that area. I also enjoy teaching freshmen each fall semester in a learning and leading class.

## **What one aspect of education would you like to change?**

In higher education, most disciplines do not require any type of andragogy (adult education). Early in my higher education journey, Dr. Gail Linam stressed to me one of the greatest tasks of the chief academic officer is to help discipline experts to become teachers. This is a problem because most content experts are teaching what they love or what was easy for them, which may not be true for all of their learners. If learners are not learning, then faculty are probably not teaching. I would require all teaching-track terminal degrees to have an andragogy course.

## **How do you expect education to change in the next 10 to 20 years?**

More distance learning. I am not afraid of this development. I have developed and taught online learning for more than 15 years. I think it can be more difficult to develop deep relationships for some students, but I am an example of a student who did not have deep relationships throughout most of my seminary education though I was sitting in the classroom 10 or more hours a week. I think that can be challenging in both platforms.

## **Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing education.**

Private Christian higher education in smaller schools is going to face a crisis in the not-so-distant future as the likelihood grows that students may be restricted from using federal grants at schools that legally discriminate based on religion and other traditional issues. The loss of these resources for students not only is going to hurt Christian higher education, it also is going to hurt the education of our workforce because the state and federal government cannot afford to educate all these students. If this happens, Christian schools like ETBU are going to face some difficult decisions. We

currently are seeing more partnerships and grants for institutions with these types of restrictions.

I am concerned that equipping people for ministry really has been diminished over the last 40 years. Congregational experience is dominated by large events that can be powerful tools, but I think the challenge is to move people into a process of discipleship and leadership development.

## **What do you wish more people knew about education?**

The person who sacrifices the most in the instructional setting should be the teacher. I think the idea of a sage on the stage who walks in and talks off the top of his or her head is not the kind of teaching Jesus modeled. He met the learners at their point of need and offered specific ways for them to change in their knowledge, hearts or lives. It is incumbent on the teacher to understand the needs and attributes of learners in each class.

To be honest, the ways we sacrifice actually may impact learners more than the words or learning activities we use. The challenge is that learning ultimately is up to the learner, but that should not keep teachers from strategies that engage learners.

## **About Baptists**

### **Why are you Baptist?**

I had a chance to reflect on this a few years ago when a Presbyterian church in Atlanta, Ga., aggressively pursued me to join their staff. I explained to them that at the heart of my decision, aside from not feeling called, was I am a Baptist at heart.

The focus on centrality of Scripture as seen through the life of Christ, the focus on believer's baptism, the focus on the local congregation and individual in decision-making and biblical interpretation, and the focus on

the importance of freedom to express faith are key to who I am and how I approach my relationship with a congregation.

## **What are the key issues facing Baptists—denominationally and/or congregationally?**

What I have learned from serving in churches and agencies from across the denominational spectrum is there is little that really makes us different, especially down in the ranks of the organizations.

The one thing that makes these institutions similar is the damage caused by the personal pursuit of power. This pursuit of power becomes the ultimate goal, while biblical interpretations, social issues, leadership roles, shallow Christian-speak and symbolism—among other things—often become the means to the end of personal power.

Leaders use an issue-driven approach to develop transactional relationships with those who follow or collaborate with them. Often, this is done with little care for the impact on the Great Commission or the people in the organization.

I wish we could overcome these transactional relationships that form around power and instead focus on the Great Commission. I think a major reason organizations drift from their mission is that gaining and maintaining power replaces the mission or the Great Commission.

## **What would you change about the Baptist denomination—state, nation or local?**

I worry at all levels that Baptist denominations are attempting to maintain their status and influence rather than serving churches.

My first experience with the denomination was in equipping me to serve as a student and as a young minister. To be honest, I learned more about

practical ministry from events offered by the BGCT or, at that time, the Baptist Sunday School Board than I did in my seminary experience.

## **About you**

### **Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?**

This is really hard. I would have to say Dr. Gail Linam, previous provost at Dallas Baptist University, whom I served with twice in the local church and at DBU, and Nelda Williams, retired children's ministry specialist for Texas Baptists. Both of these leaders have been key to how I understand ministry and teaching. Neither of them was a professor of mine, but both taught me more than I have learned in any classroom.

As for classroom mentors, I don't have many because I was one of those students who said very little in formal educational settings, unless my speaking was being assessed. If I had classroom mentors, they would be Dr. Rosalie Beck from Baylor and Dr. Royce Rose from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Here is a funny story. I was a guest lecturer at SWBTS for a week while serving at LifeWay. While waiting for my host, one of my former professors introduced himself to me. I stated I had him as a part of my Master of Arts in Religious Education degree. He responded, "I am sorry. I only remember people who are memorable." That's pretty much me.

### **What did you learn on the job you wish you learned elsewhere?**

When we talk about change, durable change must come from the inside of the individual and the organization. Otherwise, change usually is not long-lived or as effective. It is easy to offer shallow or harsh external motivation

to followers to make changes. Though expedient, such motivators rarely lead to what is the desired outcome.

## **What is the impact of education on your family?**

When parents come to New Student Orientation, I tell them it is time to roll up the umbilical cord because their students are now adults. That does not mean checking out, but it does mean a change in the way we relate. For me personally, I have to step back and realize my children are on a journey of their own, and even though I think I know best for them, it is time for them to learn to trust God. I am happy to offer guidance, but I must show self-discipline to realize they need to rely on God for their primary guidance.

## **Other than the Bible, name some of your favorite books or authors, and explain why.**

I am going to admit I read a lot of young adult literature, along with history. I give first edition autographed books to my children and close friends. I collect a few on my own.

*John Adams* by David McCullough. McCullough crafts a narrative demonstrating a Christian leader who played an influential role at almost every major decision in the early life of our nation.

*Letters and Papers from Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer demonstrates the willingness to die for his calling to follow and be obedient to Christ.

*Leadership* by James MacGregor Burns. Burns introduced me to the concept of transactional leadership and relationships, which has given me a new perspective on work and teaching.

*Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. This is a dark young adult book narrated by death. There is hope in the love shared among people in the most difficult



of situations.

### **What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?**

Isaiah 6:8. This verse spoke to me about my calling and continues to speak to me.

### **Who is your favorite Bible character, other than Jesus? Why?**

As a children's minister, I really avoid the word "character" to refer to individuals in the Bible because in the minds of children it speaks of fiction, not of real people. The Bible person I most enjoy reading is Moses, but the people I most relate to are Caleb and Hur. Caleb and Hur supported the work of Moses but still were critical to the work.

### **Name something about you that would surprise people who know you.**

I really dislike personality tests, but recently I have discovered on the Enneagram, I am a One, which is a reformer. Ones want to do what is right. No one who knows me would be surprised by this, but what might surprise them is I don't say everything I think. It is not that I talk a lot. People wear me out. Most folks know me as a person who is not reluctant to speak a difficult truth. The good news is I don't say all the truth I see or know.

### **If you could get one "do over" in education, what would it be, and why?**

I was a first-generation college student, and I could not see much past that first degree. Dr. Rosalie Beck and Dr. Gail Linam were the first to challenge me that a terminal degree would equip me well for serving Christ. I did not take their guidance very seriously in my undergraduate and masters work.

*Edited for clarity.*