

# Relational Support Briefing - Nadia Bolz-Weber and Jim Gonia

“I’m the kind of person who needs a bishop,” [Nadia Bolz-Weber](#) tells me. “I’m why we have them!”

I’ve called Nadia because I want to learn about the transformative relationship she had with her bishop when she led [House for All Sinners and Saints](#)—an inclusive Christian church in Denver, Colorado. Set up in 2008, Nadia didn’t fit the description of your usual pastor. Tattooed, swears, open about her recovery journey, and a preposterously talented preacher: she remains the closest thing Mainline American Protestantism has to a rockstar.



Nadia has gone on to become the author of a number of NYTimes best-selling books, the host of a hit-podcast, and this spring, she’s selling out a national tour of conservative states. But when she got started, few people were paying attention.

“I never set out to be a pastor,” she explains. “I went to seminary because I was on the academic track. But while researching the [Emerging Church movement](#), I got inspired and thought, oh my God, I can imagine starting something like that!” Her imagination expanded from examples overseas, too, after a trip to [Fresh Expressions churches](#) in the United Kingdom.

But despite support from her seminary, friends, and other pastors, the bishop's office stalled. "I remember one Boomer guy who oversaw church plants who just had no idea what to make of me—nor what to do with me. He patronized me!"

But Nadia founded House for All Sinners and Saints anyway. Even *before* she was ordained.

"Wasn't that an issue?" I ask.

"The thing about being a Lutheran is that it is a *theological* identity," she explains. "It's different from other systematic theologies. Whereas Anglicans have a shared prayer book, we have a shared theology. And because they trusted me as a theologian, I was seldom questioned as a practitioner."

That's why House for All Sinners and Saints carries its name: Nadia likes to say that Lutherans believe that we are one hundred percent sinners—and one hundred percent saints. Quickly, the community became a haven for queer Christians and a center of liturgical innovation. "We did crazy stuff but [the denomination] knew it was rooted in orthodoxy in our tradition. So I was fine."

Eventually, the bishop was replaced with someone Nadia already knew—Jim Gonia. And everything changed.



"Jim had known me as a young mom who had little kids; someone who was trying to scrape together enough credits to graduate college in my 30s," shares Nadia. "He was the first person who made me feel like I had things to say that were worth hearing."

She and Jim would sit on the porch and talk. “I’d rattle off an opinion about something, and he would lean in and say, ‘What?! Tell me more!’”

“He checked in with me a lot. And by this point I had become a public figure, so my work was both in the congregation—and to a wider public. He’d text me and say, ‘Give me a call.’ And then when I’d call, he’d ask ‘How is your soul today?’”

Nadia trusted him. And Jim trusted her.

“I think innovators are folks who have a strong sense of themselves and are willing to take risks,” he says. “But there’s always a danger for leaders like that to think of themselves as an island. It was my job to help innovators remember that they are part of something bigger than themselves; to hold in tension the freedom to be and the notion that you’re not as important as you think you are!”

“The gift I learned from Nadia is that inviting accountability is a mark of a strong leader. Of a healthy leader.”

And that accountability showed up in powerful moments. When Nadia’s best-selling book *Pastrix* came out, Jim asked if he could visit House for All Sinners and Saints on the Sunday before publication.

“He had me kneel down in front of everyone,” remembers Nadia “and gave me a blessing and prayed over me.” Nadia recites the exact words he used. “He said, ‘Thank you for the gifts of Nadia’s ministry and *protect her from believing that she’s anything but a servant of the Gospel.*’”

Wow. Protect her from believing that she’s anything but a servant of the Gospel.

“Because he’d known me so long, because he believed in me and my work, he really knew who I was.”

Because Jim had been curious about her, had accompanied her, and had supported her—helping her forge a new path in denominational systems that weren’t often ready for her—Nadia trusted and respected Jim. But it was because he held her accountable to the mission they both shared that she needed him. “I valued his input. In fact, I availed myself of his counsel so much more than other pastors did!” she says, laughing.

A few years ago, Jim advised Nadia that it was time to bring on a second clergy member to lead the community. It had grown beyond what one person could handle, especially while also writing and speaking around the country. And when Nadia passed over the reins, Jim was there to bless her into her new full-time role in public ministry.

Jim retired last year. He decided it was time to learn how to cook, so this time it was Nadia’s turn to oversee his development. “I showed him five different recipes—including soups and

how to bake a scone. It was a whole cooking school in a day!" Before he came over, the unlikely rockstar texted the former bishop to tell him, "Bring tupperware!"



### Reflection Questions

Think about the relationship between Nadia and Jim and reflect on the following questions.

1. SUPPORT:
  - How did Jim support Nadia?
  - What kind of relational support do you find yourself needing?
2. ACCOUNTABILITY:
  - How did Jim hold Nadia accountable?
  - When have you experienced healthy accountability? Or what might that look like?
3. BLESSING:
  - How did Jim bless Nadia's ministry?
  - Who blesses your leadership? How?