

Announcer: Welcome to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. A podcast all about leadership, change and personal growth. The goal? To help you lead like never before in your church or in your business. Now your host, Carey Nieuwhof.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, hey, everybody, and welcome to episode 224 of the podcast. My name is Carey Nieuwhof and I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before. Well, our guest today is a return guest.

Carey Nieuwhof: He was on last month with his wife Jenny where told a very powerful, personal, raw story about losing their daughter at the age of five. If you heard that episode, oh my goodness, it was just heartbreaking. I heard from someone on social today who said, finished listening to that episode, sitting in my car ugly crying. I did the same thing. I just broke down when we finished the episode.

Carey Nieuwhof: I really appreciate the opportunity to share not only the ups of leadership, but the downs of leadership because I think isn't that where we all live? Like, really, everyday, that's where we live. Levi's back and this time I have an interview with him about his ministry.

Carey Nieuwhof: It was a fun opening question. Opening question is like, dude, why Montana? Why do you plant this like mega church in Montana, and he's got a fascinating answer. I think you're going to love that. Also, thank you for all of you who have left ratings and reviews. We read them all. We've had some of the best Tuesdays and then release day in weeks and months we've ever had on this podcast in terms of listenership.

Carey Nieuwhof: Thank you to Katie Bowman. You just left a review. To Rick DLR, to a guy named Sunbar. I think it's a guy. SB Gwynn, thank you for that. Then best name ever on iTunes, Pastor EZE. I'm going to change my name to like Pastor EZE. That's best one ever.

Carey Nieuwhof: Guys, thank you so much for your reviews and thank you for helping us get the word out. Also this week we got a couple of special things coming up. One is I did this course called breaking 200. It has helped literally over a thousand churches get past the 200 barrier.

Carey Nieuwhof: We've got some special material for you coming up on this podcast in the next week or so that are going to help you smash growth barriers, but the course is available right now at the best price it will be ever offered at. The price is going to go up next week.

Carey Nieuwhof: I would love for you to get in on it before it's too late. Head on over to [breaking200course.com](http://breaking200course.com) and get in on that before the price goes up. Speaking of rising prices, any employer listening to this whether you're a faith-based organization, a not for profit, a church, if you have five employees or more, you need to check out Remodel Health.

Carey Nieuwhof: One of the challenges I think a lot of people are dealing with is just payroll cost that are getting out of control. It's tough for employers, it's tough for employees. That's where Remodel Health uses technology to say, enough with one size fits all.

Carey Nieuwhof: Even if you have 500 employees, they're like, we can custom tailor healthcare plans for individual needs greatly reducing your cost and greatly helping the beneficiaries, so everybody wins. Healthcare costs are crippling. I talk to Justin Clements, he's the CEO and founder of Remodel Health, and I said, is it true that families are actually going bankrupt because of healthcare costs?

Justin Clements: It is. In the United States, the number one reason for personal bankruptcy is because of medical bills. 40% of Americans that file bankruptcy say that they're filing bankruptcy because of medical bills. Those people that file bankruptcy, 80% of them have health insurance.

Justin Clements: It's not that they don't have health insurance. It's that they can't afford a high deductible and then they don't have enough health and protection after they come into a situation that is making them hit their deductible.

Carey Nieuwhof: What if it could just be easier for everybody? On average, Remodel Health not only saves employees money, but employers money. 34% on average is what they're saving. Faith-based organizations and churches, check out [remodelhealth.com/Carey](http://remodelhealth.com/Carey).

Carey Nieuwhof: Learn more and get into 2018 when it comes to saving on healthcare. Also, do you know that when a church starts using digital giving, giving actually increases. I mean think about it. If you had to pay cash for everything, and I'm sure there's like five of you who still pay cash for everything, but most of you guess what we're using? I use Apple Pay all the time. I pay off my watch.

Carey Nieuwhof: All right? You can't do that in most churches, which is why more and more churches are turning to Pushpay. The average American spends about four hours a day on their cellphone and last year, push pay facilitated 3 billion dollars in contributions to churches.

Carey Nieuwhof: It's no wonder so many organizations trust Pushpay to drive participation, engagement and inspire generosity. Visit [pushpay.com](http://pushpay.com) to learn more. See what everyone is saying and talk to an expert who can help your people give, because you know what? A lot of people want to give, they just don't know how and it is 2018.

Carey Nieuwhof: When you visit [pushpay.com](http://pushpay.com) and talk to someone, tell them that I sent you. Tell him Carey sent you. Hey, we are going to jump in now to my conversation with Fresh Life Church's Founding Pastor Levi Lusko. Well, Levi, welcome to the podcast. It's a privilege to have you.

Levi Lusko: Thanks for having me on. It's a real great privilege.

Carey Nieuwhof: I got to start on an interesting place. Why Montana?

Levi Lusko: You know what? I asked myself that regularly. Looking back, I think the reason is because of all the salvations and all of the powerful things God's done. Looking forward, we could only have a hunch that that was going to be the case because we never would have picked Montana.

Levi Lusko: I grew up in the rocky mountains of Colorado, so I like the mountains. Just preference wise, I love the mountains, but I thought I was going to stay in Orange County, California and surf and eat In and Out Burgers but God just started to put this real dream of planting a church in an area where if that church didn't exist, that option wouldn't be available of the kind of church we were going to open.

Levi Lusko: And so Montana got put on the radar real randomly. Someone said off hand to us. After we'd spoken at an event in Montana, you should come plant a church here. We didn't even intend to pray about it, but we said, we'll pray about that.

Carey Nieuwhof: Uh-oh.

Levi Lusko: God wouldn't let us stop thinking about it, so 12 years later here we are.

Carey Nieuwhof: Really? That's amazing. Because I mean Orange County, lots of large churches. You could have easily had a fruitful ministry there. Was it just like as random as that? Somebody said, come plant a church in Montana, and that was about it?

Levi Lusko: The guy who said it didn't even live here, He just vacationed here. But he never could find a church to go to on vacation. He was kind of saying, you know, Orange County, you throw a rock, you can hit Saddleback, Mariners, Genesis Church. Granted there's three million people in Orange County but just the kind of life giving spiritual teaching, young, charismatic, the kind of church that we'd lead.

Levi Lusko: That when we moved here there wasn't really a church like that in this area.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Levi Lusko: There was a lot of, God bless them all, small, kind of more denominational, little ten commandments in the front lawn of the church style churches. And the kind of church that we did start here, just didn't exist in this area. So I think God broke our heart for that.

Carey Nieuwhof: Was it hard to get you and Jenny on the same page on that one?

Levi Lusko: Oh my wife is the most flexible person. She's always like, the answers yes, what's the question. There's a person who's down for the ride and out for the adventure.

Levi Lusko: She always thought she would end up on the mission field, so for her this was an upgrade, of being in Montana compared to she at one point would've thought she would end up in Nepal, or Thailand, or something.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow. So that wasn't difficult at all. So southern California, growing up in the Rocky Mountains, was there a culture shift that happened or that you needed to make when you moved to Montana?

Levi Lusko: I had never been around a hunting culture. In Montana that outdoorsy snowboards, rock climbing, I mean that kind of I understand-

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Levi Lusko: But being around hunting culture, the opening of bow hunting season being a big deal, and seeing church attendance drop because oh you can go out in the woods and kill an elk.

Levi Lusko: But it's amazing. People go out and they shoot an elk with a bow and arrow, which is very impressive to me, and then they have meat in their freezer all winter long. My dentist just gave me some moose sticks and we made fajitas.

Carey Nieuwhof: Moose sticks? That's a thing?

Levi Lusko: I'll tell you, best fajitas I've ever had in my life. Moose. I mean it was amazing.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's awesome. Now I mean coming from surfer culture in southern California, I mean I say that with a bit of interest, I'm an hour north of Toronto for the last 23 years.

Carey Nieuwhof: I moved into a farming culture as well, I'm really an urban transplant and I mean people ride ATV's and hunting season is a things here and they wear fatigues and I'm like, wow do you want to go for a flat white. And it's like how do you bridge that?

Levi Lusko: Honestly, I don't try to. I think part of the reason we worked is because we haven't done that-

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Levi Lusko: A lot of the churches here are gonna do the hunter's banquet and et cetera et cetera and we've kind of just done our thing and been who we are and I think first of all there's a whole generation here who doesn't like that.

Levi Lusko: Because-

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: That's what they've grown up with. And so when we started our church we never ever would use such tacky language but what we began to be referred to around town was the rock and roll church.

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: And so we found incredible success in teenagers, 20 year olds, coming around who didn't want to be in the kind of quote unquote redneck. And the thing is that there's t.v. and there's the internet-

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Levi Lusko: And on YouTube understand culture. So there's people who don't want that and also a lot of deer people who do hunt, and are fatigues, and are that way. They know it's funny that they're gonna come in here and make fun of country music and they just kind of ... it's tongue and cheek.

Levi Lusko: I just think it is what it is, people are people.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's really interesting to me. I was sitting around with just some church leaders from Nashville, of all places, and they were kind of trying to find my Canadian accent in an afternoon of conversation.

Carey Nieuwhof: And it popped up once or twice and I said you guys don't really have a strong southern accent and they said almost everyone our age doesn't because of the internet, because of that. Is that something you're seeing? Like with younger adults, and teenagers, that there's almost a mono culture now that is independent of geography.

Levi Lusko: I completely think so.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Levi Lusko: I think that's why you can overthink. When you're starting your church and you're trying to get the mindset of the city you're moving into I think you can overthink that and as a result miss it.

Levi Lusko: Because there can be too much of trying to localize. I think one of the big words that businesses are having to use right now is "glocalization". How do we get a global feel but the local impact.

Levi Lusko: So Starbucks not rolling out winter time initiatives in months that are in cold climates and somewhat you want every Starbucks to feel the same, but you also

do want them to feel local. And I think in business and church planting you have to really think through how much the pendulum should swing to the global side and the local side.

Levi Lusko: And I think that's a fine dance that you always have to be watching the clutch on.

Carey Nieuwhof: So let's talk about that for a minute. As you've now you've got a what, 12 year track record. Fresh Life is 12 years old. So are there limits to what you found you can do.

Carey Nieuwhof: You sort of have your ideal picture maybe in your mind, Levi, of what you want your church to be but you're like you know what that doesn't work here. Or have you run into that, how has the model translated? Do you have to put any cultural buffering in?

Levi Lusko: We're transitioning from a church in Kalispell with satellite campuses to a church existing in four states. 'Cause you know-

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Levi Lusko: We started in Montana but now we're in Salt Lake City, Utah, Portland, Oregon. We were given a church in Portland a year ago that we're transitioning. Then we're in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

Levi Lusko: So we've been really working intentionally hard, and we're not there yet, but to no longer be a church that broadcasts these messages out to other places and truly a church in four states.

Levi Lusko: So one of the things we're doing right now is we're in a series where we're highlighting the hiking trails in all of the different states. So we did a week dedicated to Wyoming, a week dedicated to Oregon, a week to Montana, and a week to Utah coming up.

Levi Lusko: So I actually got back in at midnight last night, we were out in Moab, out at the canyons hiking, and filming video to really showcase. 'Cause one of our big emphasis is we used this hashtag right where we live, and we're really trying to do what God told those in Jeremiah's day to do.

Levi Lusko: To seek the peace of the city where we live and to showcase the beauty of the states et cetera. So we've been really intentional about not coming across as a Kalispell built church where others are listening and really every four of the states having their own unique beauty represented through our church.

Carey Nieuwhof: So you're kind of finding those common denominators that just transcend everything.

Levi Lusko: I think so. I know that you can't improve in something you're not aware of as a problem and we kind of realized we were slanting. Kalispell's our broadcast campus so we would use a language around here around our centers have of that slanted Kalispell heavy.

Levi Lusko: And it-

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: Makes everybody feel like they're eavesdropping.

Carey Nieuwhof: How did you pick Kalispell?

Levi Lusko: Again, it picked us. It was not intentional. So the guy made the comment you should start a church here, that was actually in reference to Kalispell. Which is not the biggest city in the state.

Carey Nieuwhof: No I was gonna say that would probably be a new name to a lot of people who even know you.

Levi Lusko: Yes. Kalispell with a K. California, Kalispell, but it sounds like you're saying cow's bell, if you don't say it right-

Carey Nieuwhof: It kind of does, yeah.

Levi Lusko: Hey, can anything good come out of Nazareth thing, honestly. And I think that's where I got pitted, Carey,'cause it would make sense for us to go start a church in Denver, or Seattle, or San Diego but the way that God has done this.

Levi Lusko: From Kalispell, touching this region, and then from Kalispell God giving us a platform to other places it honestly doesn't make any sense on paper. Kalispell has 30 thousand people in it. That's this population.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow.

Levi Lusko: A couple years ago we had this crazy big Easter thing and we had five thousand people in Kalispell on Easter Sunday. And we were joking at least one out of six people in the valley that were at our Easter service.

Levi Lusko: This doesn't make any sense.

Carey Nieuwhof: Let's focus on Kalispell for a minute if I've got that pronunciation correct.

Levi Lusko: You've crushed that.

Carey Nieuwhof: Crushin' it, good, something's going right today. What was the towns reaction? I mean we have one of our locations, our really locations exactly that, 30 thousand people. I mean you get noticed in a town like that.

Carey Nieuwhof: You can slip into New York and be a church of ten thousand, nobody knows you're there. You show up with eight people in Kalispell and people talk. So what was the response when you guys showed up from California?

Levi Lusko: A little bit of everything as you can imagine.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Levi Lusko: I mean we've been on the front page of the newspaper a lot of times. Some good, some bad. It's funny the Sunday after we had the five thousand people together on the Easter service the next morning that one we didn't make the paper.

Levi Lusko: The newspaper headline, front page, was a will filled bear gets into trash and the reporter was a bear and a trashcan and we just laughed because it was like that's literally a slow day in the news. You'll end up with deer or bear in the trashcan.

Levi Lusko: But then we buy a building up, we're the big evil monsters for real estate and not paying taxes, and the kind of drama that you get from a non profit side of things.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh boy.

Levi Lusko: So anything we do little of it becomes news but then the things that you know are news worthy sometimes don't. But we've been called a cult and all the rest. We started above a bar, so that didn't help probably.

Carey Nieuwhof: Right, right. 'Cause it was available I assume, right?

Levi Lusko: Yeah. I mean was just a space above a bar and we really wanted to build a church that was a place comfortable for seekers like you do. So well the kind of church where no one's worried about the building falling in on them 'cause they've got maybe drunk there last Friday night. You know what I mean?

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, I do. I do. And so that itself was different. Did the local churches, 'cause this is a real issue for people who are in small and medium sized towns, did the local churches feel threatened by you? Or even now especially do they feel threatened by you?

Levi Lusko: Right now I have really good friendship with the two big churches in town that one of them is newer, it was an old old church that got taken over and the guy took it over and those other guys are the more influential churches in the city.

Levi Lusko: So thank goodness we have great relationship with them. But there was a season, not so much. The predecessor there, we would hear regularly. So they were talking about y'all again on a weekend and warning their kids about you and then just random stuff like we had heard that one church was saying that we would flyer the cars in the parking lot of their church.

Levi Lusko: Like trying to basically win people over. Which is ridiculous. First of all you know as well as I do the people who come from other churches are the one's who bring the most problems. Because whatever calls them to leave their church is going to make them a devil of hell at yours.

Levi Lusko: And especially when they come saying how terrible their old pastor was, you're almost like let me start my stop watch because you'll be saying this to me tomorrow.

Carey Nieuwhof: Totally.

Levi Lusko: The non Christians who come in Pagan have no idea. They're not the one's arguing about the flavor of the communion juice and the temperature of the baptism water.

Carey Nieuwhof: Right, right.

Levi Lusko: We've had our fair share of moments of being on the receiving end of that and I think the thing we just do is we just make it a policy that we're never going to talk bad about another churches, we're never going to run them down and just let that work itself out.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, and no that's a really smart approach. So if my math is correct, are you at 12 locations now?

Levi Lusko: That's correct.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's a lot of locations and what's really cool is you've got pictures of your locations on your website. Which I found really fascinating.

Carey Nieuwhof: First of all let me break this down, how did you get to 12 locations? Let's start there.

Levi Lusko: Okay so when we hit a tipping point, Carey, where we knew the rate of people moving into the city of Kalispell and the cliff at which we were growing we kind of just realized we're going to hit a saturation point where there's not enough new people coming in and the people who live in this city have either A, been invited, B, been, or C are pretty set in their ways-

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: On not coming.

Carey Nieuwhof: Barring an act of God they're not coming here.

Levi Lusko: Keep loving them and killing them with kindness but chances are they're not there. So we realized okay this can't keep growing at this rate forever-

Carey Nieuwhof: Can I interrupt with just a quick question, how big is your Kalispell campus now? Your broadcast?

Levi Lusko: On a good Sunday we'll see 18 hundred people in Kalispell.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah and you're thinking that's near the top of the curve, maybe.

Levi Lusko: Yeah. Well we actually hit a saturation point there where we were closer to 25 hundred people for awhile. We've been 12 years in Kalispell, we've had some ups and downs, and difficulties as any church does.

Levi Lusko: So we actually began making plans to branch out at about 750 because we just saw the writing on the wall as far as a new customer base. If that makes sense-

Carey Nieuwhof: It does.

Levi Lusko: So we began making plans for another location and then we opened up another one and then at the point kind of my goal was to get a campus in every major market in Montana.

Levi Lusko: So which we've done that now.

Carey Nieuwhof: How many cities is that in Montana?

Levi Lusko: Nine. So that's any population over 30 thousand. 'Cause Kalispell is actually on the smaller end, Butte is maybe 20 thousand but right around there. Anywhere there is that many people or more so Missoula, Bozeman, Billings, Helena, Great Falls and then Butte, Whitefish and then Polson.

Levi Lusko: But Polson, Kalispell, Whitefish are all in this valley that is about 100 thousand people, all three of them together. So that's our greatest concentration of churches is Whitefish, Kalispell, Polson then it spreads out from there.

Levi Lusko: So after that goal, because there's only one million people in all of Montana-

Carey Nieuwhof: Right, right.

Levi Lusko: So it actually dawned on me the day I was in Miami. I was preaching at a church and I was staying at hotel high up in the sky.

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: And I'm saying that badly, it was a tall hotel-

Carey Nieuwhof: Tall building. Yeah you're thinking not many of these in Montana.

Levi Lusko: We don't have an escalator in the city I'm in. Not one, Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof: That would be fascinating. The escalator test. You know what yeah a role you would probably fail it doesn't have an escalator either.

Levi Lusko: So you have to drive an hour and a half to get to an escalator from where I'm at and it was so funny because we were on this trip once and my kids kept playing with the escalator and asking to go up and get looped down it again.

Levi Lusko: And I was like why would you want to go this way and then it dawned on me that we don't have one.

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: Anyhow, so I'm in Miami and we're on the 20th floor hotel whatever, and I'm looking out on the city and it dawned on me that I could see a million people. Right where I was I could see a million people.

Levi Lusko: And then I thought how far would I have to go up to see a million people in Montana? And I realized that I'd have to go 30 thousand feet or so. Roughly speaking you could go above the whole state and that was when God kind of pushed my heart, like how do I reach a million people.

Levi Lusko: Well God's just kind of saying you're going to have to get creative and so at that point our strategy shifted to more of a shot gun approach. Where if we can get a small campus in every city within Montana we won't run out of opportunities of people to reach.

Levi Lusko: And so from there it spread out to Salt Lake City, and then from now we see ourself like I said a church in four states.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's amazing. So one of the things I would encourage people to do, we'll link this in the show notes, but I would encourage people to visit your churches website and look at the buildings.

Carey Nieuwhof: Because often you know, and you speak at the biggest conferences there are, and often when you're on a stage with the band and the lights and everything people just make this assumption that you're going back to massive campuses that cost 20 million dollars each and that's not exactly your story, is it Levi?

Levi Lusko: No. If there was a bootstrap operation it's ours.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Levi Lusko: Like I said we didn't go through ARC, we didn't go through the vertical church network. When we started our church we, I mean I was a teaching pastor at a church in Orange County, we left, we had an up slating shift for a year. I told a couple friends hey do you want to come with me?

Levi Lusko: One came, two came within the next couple months, but we just literally gathered people in that little room above the bar and started teaching the Bible. We had 14 people come our first weekend.

Levi Lusko: There was no plan, there was no launch team. I think we were still buying MySpace ads back then.

Carey Nieuwhof: Back in the day.

Levi Lusko: There was no FaceBook, there was no iPhone. I mean I was tweeting but it was you had to go to the website to tweet, you couldn't do it mobile yet.

Carey Nieuwhof: Right, you could still text your tweets. Do you remember that?

Levi Lusko: That was how I tweeted. I texted.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. You could text to Twitter. Alright, few of us remember that.

Levi Lusko: So we bought a newspaper ad, I mean we put flyers up on the community boards and fourteen people came. So I mean it was literally just a very small start, humble beginnings, and then when we go into a new town now we're using more of the ARC method to build a launch team et cetera.

Levi Lusko: But we're having to adapt it to a small town.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. And some of those, I mean when you're in a small town, and I've got a few episodes either coming up or in this past year where we've talked about small town ministry, I really commend you for that because I think the gospel is going dark in a lot of small towns.

Carey Nieuwhof: When you get outside the Bible belt and it's going to require innovation and I know Craig Groeschel has done an unbelievable job of figuring out a model where they can pop out campuses fairly quickly and fairly inexpensively but it's still in the millions.

Carey Nieuwhof: And what does it cost Fresh Life Church, what's your minimum viable footprint? What for you is success in a small town?

Levi Lusko: Our goal would be to launch right around five hundred I mean that would be a great launch for us. And then you're going to see that attrition the next weekend, 250 people and then you're going to kind of grow from there.

Levi Lusko: I think one of the big things has been having to adapt, like you said, the mentality of what a successful launch looks like and being willing to see it on a smaller scale and grow from there.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. 'Cause some of them are almost, is it correct storefronts, and I'm saying this from the most complementary way I can because I think it's going to require, what I really admire about what you're doing is the innovation that's involved.

Carey Nieuwhof: I'm looking Kalispell is an old theater, is that right?

Levi Lusko: That's right.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah and then your location, where was it? Oh yeah in Polson is that a storefront?

Levi Lusko: Yeah that's a storefront. So that would be maybe three thousand square feet. I mean it's not big.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. You know that was my guess. I was saying to a friend I think that's about three thousand square feet. This is your interview but I think the future lies in what you're doing in places like Polson.

Carey Nieuwhof: Where you get a really vibrant church, with a strong presence, and you can flip a store front at three thousand square feet into a place where people can meet Jesus. I think that is innovative and amazing, and you know what?

Carey Nieuwhof: Most of the leaders listening to this could do that.

Levi Lusko: And you know honestly, Carey, that's very kind everything you're saying. We're having to figure that out on our own and not compare ourselves to, in our mind, to other church plans in Boston or in a metropolitan area where you are going to buy a five million dollar facility or more.

Levi Lusko: So we've had to figure out who we are. But the thing that's heartbreaking is we're not in Polson doing this, who's coming from Miami to launch in Polson. You know what I mean?

Carey Nieuwhof: Yup.

Levi Lusko: If we don't reach out, who's gonna do that? And we're able to do it because of our central organization which is offset by all the churches. What it would cost

to come in and just do Polson, you couldn't come in and make that sustainable on its own.

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: I don't think.

Carey Nieuwhof: You need the both and, right?

Levi Lusko: Yeah. I think what's so unique about our church is we're able to do what we're doing in some of these smaller areas because I only need about 80 to 90 hours at a campus. Like I think Polson's payroll would be about 90 hours added up, one full time and then maybe three part time positions.

Levi Lusko: Whereas because the accounting and everything creative, everything else is offset by our whole global church. We're able to offset the work in a place like that where the suicide rates are out of this world.

Levi Lusko: Polson's skews Indian because of the reservation nearby it, it skews the small towns, the opioid crisis, Carey, is devastating. Montana per capita is highest suicide rate in the nation.

Carey Nieuwhof: Really?

Levi Lusko: (Affirmative) And all of our campuses are in states that are higher on the list. I think we have one, three, six, and 16 represented per capita suicide rates and then you have they call it "hillbilly heroin" which is oxys.

Levi Lusko: It's just unbelievable and I know Canada's hit by that hard too.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. Yeah, very much. Well I'm getting emotional when I'm hearing you talk. I just think this is so important and we've got to figure out a way to make it scale and you're figuring out a way to do it.

Carey Nieuwhof: What do you think the potential is for Fresh Life Church as you look ahead at the next five to ten years? Do you have a specific plan?

Levi Lusko: Yeah so we've been in a holding pattern of launching. Because we launched six in three years-

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: And so we had to chew what we swallowed. We've been going back to the drawing board on some systems. My CFO comes from the banking worlds, and my operations pastor is from the Air Force he used to fly F-16s. So you literally cannot throw more things at him than he can process while going six to a 100 miles an hour.

Levi Lusko: So between those two and then I have an amazing, creative staff as well. But we've been really figuring what you've been saying out. How do we make these smaller campuses viable and sustainable and pay for themselves at the same time.

Levi Lusko: In Salt Lake City, Portland, those campuses can and should be at a place where they are creating wealth that then other some of the smaller ones are able to be offset by and be subsidized by some way.

Levi Lusko: As far as not the local staff, 'cause Polson covers it's bills and it's payroll, but they're not paying for my salary. You know what I mean?

Carey Nieuwhof: Right, yup.

Levi Lusko: So but we're willing to do that 'cause we're not willing to say to a small city like Butte, Montana or to Polson, screw you. So we're-

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: I know when I have time I'm happy to know that part of mine is not just going to the church my family attends, but it going to offset the work in one of these smaller areas.

Carey Nieuwhof: No, that's good. And one of the challenges is money for sure. Another one would be recruiting team like volunteers, and staff. It's not like seminaries are exporting leaders to Montana and to the states that you're in.

Carey Nieuwhof: Tell us about your leadership development approach-

Levi Lusko: Sure.

Carey Nieuwhof: And how you're finding campus pastors, church staff, and volunteers.

Levi Lusko: Yeah. Primarily up until this point, and we don't think we've got it perfected, up until this point though what seems to be the best is hiring from within first of all. The second source of hiring has been our internship.

Levi Lusko: We've had really robust summer internship and right now there's probably three or four coming off this internship that just ended today that we would like to see, some of them are graduating college within the next year or two, but there's probably three or four of them that we hope to have on our staff full time within the next 12 to 18 months.

Levi Lusko: So those are the two probably, except for people getting saved within our church and then eventually coming up through the ranks and then those coming in from an internship perspective.

Carey Nieuwhof: How many interns would you have to find?

Levi Lusko: I think there were 21 this summer.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow.

Levi Lusko: Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: So it's just a really robust program that you've developed and obviously you've got a profile where maybe you can pull some people in who wouldn't normally find themselves there.

Levi Lusko: Well the great this is with internship it is almost hiring from within because you've had three months with them in a role-

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: Doing it where they paid to be there and then I probably have ten former interns on staff, maybe more.

Carey Nieuwhof: How many staff do you have these days?

Levi Lusko: There's about 80 altogether between full time and part time.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. It's a good size staff. I know you, Jenny, and I are going to do a separate podcast at some point where we talk about your story, and your situation together, and the loss of your daughter.

Carey Nieuwhof: Apart from that what had been some of the biggest hurdles that you've had to scale as a leader? Whether that's personal or just in terms of your leadership life. Like you look back over over the last 12 years you're like huh that was big.

Levi Lusko: Yeah. Oh man, Carey, I don't know how long we're going to be going. A hurdle is a long conversation. I think some of the biggest frustrations have been in, my new book is coming out called I Declare War: Four Keys to Winning the Battle With Yourself, and-

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh.

Levi Lusko: That has been without a doubt, basically that book tells a story of me trying to come to terms with the most difficult person that I lead. Which is no one on my staff, but it's me.

Levi Lusko: And leading myself, managing myself, emotional behavior and dealing with bad moods, learning how to have good bad days, and having the greatest day but not letting that affect the way I treat people, my disposition.

Levi Lusko: And just knowing how much I have the capacity to set the pace positively or negatively, for a meeting, for our team, for morale et cetera.

Carey Nieuwhof: I can't wait to read that and you do come up with amazing titles by the way. Just for the record-

Levi Lusko: Thank you.

Carey Nieuwhof: As soon as you said that I'm like oh title envy, there it is. (Laughs) So okay let's walk through that, you don't wake up happy everyday, welcome to the world.

Levi Lusko: No, and not just that. I wake up pretty happy 'cause I get coffee quickly but it's more just the funk. I don't even know how to describe it, it's a leadership funk and it's not just bad days where oh the giving was bad.

Levi Lusko: What no one ever told me, Carey, I'd love to hear your perspective on this. No one ever told me that you could be having the best of times and the worst of times simultaneously.

Carey Nieuwhof: Agreed.

Levi Lusko: I think you expect the bad seasons to be bad, but I think somewhat you compensate for that with faith. It's the melancholy in the middle of success that it's almost like the great weekend but you're feeling like how will we do this again? Have we peaked? Have we plateaued?

Levi Lusko: It's great series or, like you mentioned a great title, and going I look 50 years forward, how will I ever come up with more of those.

Levi Lusko: You know what I mean?

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, yeah. Is the well going to run dry? Is this the end? And what have we built and how do we sustain it? And how come everybody's happy and I'm not?

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, I've never experienced any of that Levi so I'm unfamiliar. Of course, absolutely, welcome to my life. On this day of recording this interview, Toni, my wife hadn't been feeling particularly well.

Carey Nieuwhof: She's feeling a little bit better today but I think the funk caught up with me and she's like what are you upset about? And I'm like if I knew that, you know (Laughs)

Levi Lusko: Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: And it's a good day, there's so many things moving in the right direction but you're right I think the leadership funk, the weirdness because there's not even a direct cause and effect, what is that?

Levi Lusko: And then learning how to lead out of that, and manage that, and not allow those things to creep. 'Cause I think the creep happens is where it's like dominoes and then everything gets thrown off.

Levi Lusko: So how to still lead at your best and be the leader your team needs even when you're dealing with those battles on the inside. And not compartmentalizing in an unhealthy way but I think, Carey, what I didn't know how to do well when I first started out that I would like to think I'm getting better at is being able to choose what's right even when I feel something different.

Levi Lusko: And knowing that that's not hypocrisy or double standard, that's just obedience and faithfulness. So the biggest paradigm shift I've probably had on my walk with Jesus has been when I realized that worship is not a feeling expressed through actions, it's an act of obedience that sometimes leads to feelings.

Levi Lusko: So if I worship because God is worthy of it not because I feel like it then I can take that model and apply to every area of my life. It's not fake to be kind to my wife even when I feel I'm not. It's actually, that's sanctification that's dying to yourself and God blesses that obedience.

Levi Lusko: 'Cause our culture, my generation especially places such a high value on authenticity that we excuse bad behavior in the name of living my truth.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's so true. And I think you're right that's been part of my journey too. Your emotions eventually catch up to your obedience but your obedience has to go first. Even on the days you don't feel like being kind, even on the days you don't feel like sitting in the chair that you're sitting in.

Carey Nieuwhof: Man, when does that book come out? Do you know?

Levi Lusko: October 30th.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh like its imminent, that's awesome.

Levi Lusko: Oh yeah so I don't have mine in hand like you do but two days ago we gave the approval for it to go to the printer so it's on its way.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's exciting. It's called I Declare War?

Levi Lusko: Four Keys to Winning the Battle With Yourself.

Carey Nieuwhof: It must be available for pre order is it?

Levi Lusko: Yeah, so the pre order campaign alive and well and right now, when is this gonna air?

Carey Nieuwhof: You know in I'm gonna say September. I can look, Levi Lusko, let's see. I've got it October 30th, is that a good day? Is that your release day?

Levi Lusko: That's my release day.

Carey Nieuwhof: Hey look at that. You see, we did that. So today this book that we're talking about comes out. How about that, Levi.

Levi Lusko: That is the most amazing gift, yes. So yeah-

Carey Nieuwhof: You're welcome. I think we probably planned it that way, thank you Holly Beth and your team, so, what do we know.

Levi Lusko: There you go, if you buy two books this year I Didn't See it Coming, buy two of those. If you buy three books this year buy two copies of I Didn't See it Coming and one copy of I Declare War.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's helpful, what else do you cover now that I realize that this is a launch day? It was my first interview with you so I'm like I wanted to just ask you about 1000 questions, what have been some other struggles that you cover in the book? Just so people know, I want to make sure we cover that.

Levi Lusko: Talking about what I call being hijacked by the version of yourself you don't want to be. Really the book breaks down, like did you play war with your grandma as a kid? I declare war, the card game?

Carey Nieuwhof: No, did you though? Obviously.

Levi Lusko: So yes. So the card game war you each have half the deck and you put a card down and if you tie you have to do four cards then you say I declare war.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh, that's fun.

Levi Lusko: The book breaks down into the four cards and the first card is the words that you speak. The second card is the thoughts that you think. The third card is the habits that you choose to make repeatedly and then the fourth card is the Holy Spirit phantom power that gives us energy and that's what keeps the book from being self help instead it taps into God's help.

Levi Lusko: Because yes we have to speak, think, and act like we should but if we're not trusting the Holy Spirit we won't have energy to power our efforts towards change. To actually become the leaders, the fathers, the parents, the children that we were born to be.

Carey Nieuwhof: What does dependence on the Holy Spirit look like in your week?

Levi Lusko: So for me I think it's the air I breathe. I mean there's not a day I'm not lifting my hands up and asking for the help. I think Jesus said you have not 'cause you ask not so at the end of the day all the power we need for our lives to be powerful is in God's hand.

Levi Lusko: But everyday you have to ask for it anew to get it because there's no rollover minutes. If I don't ask for today's power, tomorrow I can get tomorrow's power-

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: But I will have no other chance to get today's power.

Carey Nieuwhof: No rollover minutes, that's very true. It is a daily dependence on God. You have some incredible mentors in your life, at least I would assume so, via Instagram and I follow you on Social. But you spend quite a bit of time with Craig Groeschel, quite a bit of time with people like Louie and Shelley Giglio, can you tell me the impact that mentors have had in your life and what you're learning from them?

Levi Lusko: Well I'll tell you what I learned from them from afar long before I learned from them up close.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Levi Lusko: And I would say to those listening you're like oh I don't have Louie's and Shelley's phone number, I didn't either but I learned from them and I never let distance separate me from having an impact.

Levi Lusko: So the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast is a gem. For the listeners who say well I can't meet with them in person well you can learn from how he thinks and how you think.

Levi Lusko: And so I was learning from Pastor Craig, and Pastor Louie well before they would ever know who I was. In fact I would go and attend Pastor Craig's one day leadership catalyst events with Andy Stanley, I attended multiple times.

Levi Lusko: I actually met him once in a book line, he wouldn't remember it, but I did and I took all my notes from those and I would go sit down with my staff and work through them. And I would watch his podcast, watch how we would deliver his invitations, how he would address the camera et cetera.

Levi Lusko: And so when the time came and I ended up, how did I meet Pastor Craig? I don't remember but when we finally did one day meet and he gave me his number whatever, we started talking, there was already a context of mentoring that had happened long before we were doing it up close.

Levi Lusko: But from Pastor Craig I would say the thing I've learned from him the most is efficiency. I've never met a more efficient person in my entire life. In how he utilizes his time, in the intentionality in which he's a father, the way he leverages video to make Life Church possible and be able to be with his family et cetera.

Levi Lusko: And then with Louie and Shelley, I mean those people love Jesus and that's all from being around them. And Louie and Shelley as you know are probably the most creative when it comes to designing everything. The way they designed their buildings, series, language, it's all so beautifully designed.

Carey Nieuwhof: And so you're learning that from them. When you think back to leading yourself how important has it been to you, and it can sound like a rhetorical question but it's not supposed to be, how important is it to you that you have someone you can pick up the phone and talk to on a bad day? Like somebody who gets your world?

Levi Lusko: That's super important. I wouldn't say I do that too often-

Carey Nieuwhof: Okay.

Levi Lusko: I would say it would be more of a text. I don't go too often without seeing one of those you mentioned at an event, at a conference so I think I don't talk on the phone.

Carey Nieuwhof: You keep short accounts. Yeah you're right, you're right. I'm reading 90's language here. (Laughs) Pick up the phone and call somebody but yeah.

Levi Lusko: I don't call anybody except for my dad and my mom-

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: Those are the two people I really talk on the phone to other than that it's text and then in person as much as we can.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's a good point. That's a really good point. It's funny for me I still, and I'm older than you are, but I still enjoy a conversation every once in a while. I had half an hour with my son today in Toronto, I'll call friends from time to time.

Carey Nieuwhof: But there's something about voice to voice that's really good but yeah I blow up my phone too. I had a friend who's leading a very large church text me yesterday with a personnel issue and all that.

Carey Nieuwhof: But I guess the real question under that question is for that kind of support and networking. A lot of pastors say they feel alone, a lot of pastors feel isolated, they have a bad day, they get into a place where they don't know what to do but they have no one to talk to.

Carey Nieuwhof: Talk about what you have done to guard yourself against that.

Levi Lusko: Yeah that's such a good question, isn't it? You think knowing how much you could do to damage the name of Christ, and knowing how much you could do to hurt your kids, and knowing how much you could easily do something in minutes that would erase what you've done for decades is I think important to constantly think about.

Levi Lusko: Because sin makes you stupid and we all know those people you're like how did you not see this coming, you know what I mean? And it's the little no's that justify the big no's so it doesn't seem like that big of a deal, you watch this show you lower the morals in some small area but it's not the big compromises that just pop up.

Levi Lusko: It's the small ones and I think so if you're preaching the Bible but not personally living this stuff out, if you're not getting your own time with Jesus, I think in those rhythms of fasting I think those safeguards into place as far as not being alone.

Levi Lusko: I don't travel out in the road alone, I don't spend time alone with female staff members, I think it's basically putting a rumble strip in your life to hear the problem before you get to the problem.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. Yeah, no that's really good. One more question for you before we wrap up today. You think about the future, and not just your church not just Fresh Life Church, but I want you to think about The Church. I think we all agree things are changing pretty fundamentally, where do you see The Church going in the next few years?

Levi Lusko: Well I think that churches have got to figure out why brick and mortar would even be a viable option for people and what that looks like with podcasts and worship music. People in our churches they can listen to Steven Furtick and Hillsong Worship and not need to come to church so why should they care.

Levi Lusko: At the end of the day it's going to be family life that's going to make the difference. You know what the kids experience, what the kids program looks like et cetera. We're re hauling our Kalispell entire facility for kids, every effort is going into that space.

Levi Lusko: Rock climbing walls, and gaga pit for the dodge ball, and nine square, and that stuff and then we're filtering that out at every location because otherwise there's no reason to not watch church online.

Carey Nieuwhof: Right.

Levi Lusko: So I think the whole thing we have to pivot and shift and think more about, especially for us, being that we started as a younger church we've always been a little bit behind on youth and kids programs so we're compensating catching up.

Levi Lusko: But I think it's also more imperative than ever that we're thinking through those things that would make brick and mortar even necessary for people.

Carey Nieuwhof: So you're gonna double down on family ministry?

Levi Lusko: Absolutely.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's fascinating. Yeah I know you met with a mutual friend, Frank Beeler from Orange and they've got some brilliant ideas on that stuff and I can't wait to see what you do in that area.

Levi Lusko: Oh man well I would highly recommend them. We love, love, love, love Orange and yeah so.

Carey Nieuwhof: Cool. Well Levi, people are gonna want to learn more. Where can they find you online?

Levi Lusko: So yeah Levi Lusko on Instagram and website and all that stuff.

Carey Nieuwhof: Cool. We'll link to all of it in the show notes. Hey, thank you so much for spending some time with us and I can't wait to catch up next time.

Levi Lusko: Thanks for having me on book release day.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, yeah! Big day, thanks Levi.

Levi Lusko: I really appreciate it.

Carey Nieuwhof: That was a great chat, I mean I just love Levi and I love seeing how God's using him really all over the country as he speaks at conferences, and his influence grows and man what a thrill.

Carey Nieuwhof: You can find everything in the show notes. Just go to [careynieuwhof.com/episode224](http://careynieuwhof.com/episode224) where you will find information about everything including the links to [breaking200course.com](http://breaking200course.com) where we are offering some specials for just a couple more days so make sure you get in on those before the price goes up and help your church break through church growth barriers.

Carey Nieuwhof: Also all the information about Pushpay and then Remodel Health and make sure you go to [remodelhealth.com/Carey](http://remodelhealth.com/Carey), [pushpay.com](http://pushpay.com) and tell them Carey sent you and thank you to those guys. Because you know what they do we trust the people that we partner with in this and they make it possible to bring you

professionally produced episodes, top rated guests, and all that stuff that sort of goes on behind the scenes here at the podcast.

Carey Nieuwhof: So I really appreciate their help in bringing you this for free, to you. So next week we are back with a fresh episode and I sit down, we have a great conversation, with Adam Hamilton. A lot of you will know Adam, he leads the largest United Methodist Church in America. He's been at this for many decades, has so much wisdom and here's an excerpt from next weeks episode.

Adam Hamilton: It was the most painful thing I've ever walked through in ministry. I questioned myself, did I miss God's will, did I fail you God, and I'm not prone to depression, I spent a year in a funk and wondering if I needed to go somewhere else or leave.

Adam Hamilton: And I was getting job offers at that time to go be president of a seminary or go here or there whatever and I remember my wife said to me in the middle of this I told her do you mind if we do something else, I can't do this for 20 more years this hurts too much and she said well I'll go with you anywhere you feel God's calling us to go I just have one question for you is God calling you to leave or are you running away?

Carey Nieuwhof: So that's next week on the podcast. We are back with a fresh episode and thank you guys so appreciate it. Also thank you to everybody who has continued to make the launch of Didn't See it Coming so strong we are still sitting at number one now, two and a half almost three months in it's categories.

Carey Nieuwhof: And man you guys, thank you. Now before we go any nerds out there, I'm a nerd, and if enjoy the behind the scenes conversation tomorrow I've got the next episode. I know Tuesday's is kind of our constant day but tomorrow I'm going to give you a fresh one and I sit down with Josh Gagnon and Daniel King and we talk about how to break church growth barrier at 30, 100, 200, 400, 1000, multi site, you name it.

Carey Nieuwhof: They've got nine campuses, almost 10, in four different states and we go right back to the beginning and how do you make sure pastoral care scales. I mean we just nerd out, that's tomorrow on the pod cast. So actually we'll talk to you before next Tuesday but in the meantime I hope our time together today has helped you lead like never before.

Announcer: You've been listening to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. Join us next time for more insights on leadership, change, and personal growth to help you lead like never before.