

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. And now your host, Carey Nieuwhof.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, hey everybody and welcome to Episode 245 of the podcast. And Happy Valentine's Day. My name is Carey Nieuwhof. I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before. My guest today is someone who's been on this podcast multiple times, and there's good reason for it. He is Jud Wilhite and okay quick show of hands how many of you have been to Vegas? Yeah, I've been there a couple of times. It's funny when you don't gamble it's a really interesting town to go to but that's where Jud lives and he talks about the two Vegas's like the Vegas sort of everybody in America and the rest of the world knows and then the Vegas he lives in, which actually has two million people, most of whom he is trying to reach for Jesus. So Central Church under his leadership has grown to 20,000 attenders on a weekend basis which is just crazy under any circumstances.

Carey Nieuwhof: And we talk about real life in Vegas and then Jud who's been in leadership there for a number of years kind of opens up the hood and says "Hey, here are the assumptions we're looking at in ministry right now. Here's what's working, here's what's not working. Here's some new strategies we're going to be developing to try to reach new people." And basically it's almost like you just sit around the leadership table with Jud and say "Okay. Tell me what's going on." And he does. You're gonna love this interview. It's fantastic. And of course, it's got application for anybody who wants to reach out into the wider communities. So I think you're going to love it.

Carey Nieuwhof: Jud thanks for being back on this special day so that's coming up today. Thank you to everybody who subscribes and everybody who shares this episode. Your support means so much, as does your support of our partners on this podcast. So, speaking of which Rethink Leadership is one of the partners of this podcast and honestly one of the partners in my life. It is a senior leader event that I've been involved in for three years now and we're back for a fourth year May first through second. Just two days in Atlanta, Georgia. So my guess, with content being so available today is that you're like "I don't need more content." And I get it. But you know what you need? You need friends, you need access, and you need someone you can have a conversation with and that's how Brad Lomenick and the team designed Rethink Leadership. Everybody sits around round tables which I know freaks people out. They're like "I don't want to talk to people." But by the end you're like so grateful because we only allow peers in. So this is a gathering exclusively for senior pastors, campus pastors, and executive pastors. That's it.

Carey Nieuwhof: So, you can kind of let your hair down, talk honestly about the stuff that you're dealing with. And when it comes to speakers it's a TedTalk style, even interview style event. So you're not gonna get the forty minute talk that you're not really that interested in. And if you want more there is more. We have affinity conversations where speakers are limited to fifteen minutes of content, 45

minutes of dialogue with you. It's an intimate boutique event, sells out every year. And right now, for another week, you can still get a discount on registration. Listen it's totally worth the full price but if you like saving money like I do you can get 40 dollars off a pass. So, head on over to [RethinkLeadership.com](http://RethinkLeadership.com) and man it's gonna be an incredible year. I'm so excited for it. Make sure you join us.

Carey Nieuwhof: You also, by the way, if you do this now, get a 50 dollar credit toward any Orange curriculum. So go to [RethinkLeadership.com](http://RethinkLeadership.com) and join me in Atlanta at the beginning of May. Also, by the way, that buys you access to the entire Orange conference. So it's kind of a good deal. Also, are you staffing, or how are you staffing your online presence? And you know what the story is for, well mega churches, they have staff for that but for 90 percent of churches it's probably you as the lead pastor or you as the associate or the youth pastor because he's younger and ... what happens when that happens is it's not very good and let's be honest you know it's not very good. Yet, you can't afford more. So what do you do? So my guess is a lot of you, if you're a lead pastor, you're working on your next sermon series with your team. You've arrived on a great name, and maybe you pour your heart and soul into it but like it needs graphics, it needs a social media presence. Like what if 30 percent more people would hear your message because you did a better job on your social. I mean that's what we're finding.

Carey Nieuwhof: The better we do on social the better the series turns out to be in terms of people who engage with it. Well that kind of creative work can be overwhelming for your team so that problem is solved with Pro Media Fire which is a creative team in the cloud of media professionals. The process is simple, you give them the name of the sermon series, they will create a custom series brand. Yeah they even do that. Social media ads, and a video, trailer, or commercial. They can take care of all your church media needs each month for a simple flat fee. Way less than you would pay anybody on your team. Pro media Fire is offering a limited special discount to the listeners of the this podcast. Ten percent off all plans for life and if you want to buy their media bundle of unlimited graphic design and custom video services, you get 40 percent off. So head on over to [PromediaFire.com/Carey](http://PromediaFire.com/Carey) and you can take advantage of that special offer.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well I'm so excited to have Jud Wilhite here. We also talk about his latest book but man this is a fun look under the hood in real time at what's happening at Central Church in Jud's life and Jud's leadership. We even touch on how to renew your heart when you've been at it for a little while. I think you're gonna love this conversation with Jud Wilhite.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well sometimes you have a guest and Jud I think we've already been talking for 25 minutes, isn't it great? It's one of those things. So it's good to catch up, welcome back.

Jud Wilhite: Ah, thank you it's such an honor to be here. Just, I love your podcast and I really am excited to just be able to share a little bit on it, thanks.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, I love you and you're always welcome here. You're such an encouragement, you're doing just a great work. So tell us where you are because I've been to your office before at Central but you've got another office the holy of holies.

Jud Wilhite: This is the holy of holies. This is a third car garage that's a stand alone garage that I have converted into the home office. So it's great, it serves the purpose well and the best part is, this is where I do a lot of content development. I can walk out of my front door and feel like I've left my house but if I go to the church office, I'm just ADD boy, all over the place, Mr. Distracted and have a really hard time actually getting work done. So ...

Carey Nieuwhof: Well I was saying to you, I don't think you'd ask me and I don't think I've written a message in my church office in over a decade. I'm just bad at it, I can't focus, people are knocking on the door and then when they don't I go out wander around cause trouble. So ...

Jud Wilhite: That's me, it's like I used to blame everybody else and then I kind of put some rules in like they ... so I had the door was guarded like nobody could get to the door and then you realize it's really not about them because I just go outside the door and find something to distract me. So the whole time it was about me and not about others and it was a real convenient blame.

Carey Nieuwhof: Even when I work at the house, my kids who are now grown, they're like "So dad what is it that you actually do? Because it just looks like you wander around a lot." And I'm like "You know? You're right, maybe I don't do anything. That may be a really good point."

Jud Wilhite: It's creative work, kids. It's creative. I'm working 24/7 I'm always thinking. Idea could strike me at dinner and that's the idea for the day.

Carey Nieuwhof: There is a truth to the creative process in that. Where do your best ideas come from because you've got a brand new book we'll talk about but like when you're ... do you have to sit down at desk or like are you ... you said you've already been to the gym today, you've worked out. Where ...

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, it's kind of a little bit all over the map. But I actually feel like some of my best ideas, especially from a leadership standpoint come in the moment when I'm in front of a couple of people and we're talking about leadership and it just comes out. I'm always grabbing my phone, that was actually good I need to write that down. I couldn't think of that when I needed to think of it. But when there's either the pressure of an audience or just the moment in a conversation where you're not trying to think of ideas. It's more stream of consciousness, it just comes out. And I feel like then I'm always just working my thumbs.

Carey Nieuwhof: Are you a verbal processor?

Jud Wilhite: Apparently I am, yes.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. I have the same thing. If I'm like probably the thing I have to be most ... I guess other than writing a book, the thing I have to be the most precise on are what we call bottom lines from my sermons. Like what is the main point, I'll work on it you know in my office for a long time. And then I go into a meeting at Connexus and they're like "Well what are you trying to drive at? What are you ..." And I'm like "No, no, no not that no, it's kind of like ..." And then I'll say something and then I'm like boom there it is.

Jud Wilhite: There it is.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, four hours alone in my office produce mud and then I go to process that mud and there it is clearly and away we go. So yeah the creative process is different for everybody. I want to start her Jud, you pastored in one of the most challenging areas of the U.S. and I have so much respect for what you're doing. And you've done it for a while now, for 15 years. And by the way, if you guys who are listening right now are more recent subscribers to the podcast you'll want to go all the way back to year one. I think the episode was in the 50s. We'll link to it, not the 1950s but like number 50 something. I think it's 54. Test my memory. It'll be in the show notes. Jud and I talked about transitioning and what that was like to not be the founding pastor. It's a fabulous episode, one of the best downloaded of all time. So we'll link to that.

Carey Nieuwhof: But anyway, you've been there for 15 years Neil Postman once wrote that Las Vegas is the modern city of our time because it's completely dedicated to entertainment, to pleasure, and to distraction. What are some principles you've learned from doing ministry in Vegas?

Jud Wilhite: I think maybe most important principle I've learned that's transferable is just the idea of speak to the broken and you'll always have an audience. And that speak can also ... you can wire your ministries up for the broken. Now, I don't mean the down and out, it could also be the up and in. Everybody's got a fundamental brokenness, a place of pain and hurt in our lives. And when we speak to those areas you will always have an audience. Because the sea of human suffering and brokenness feels endless. And I feel like in Vegas that's been one of the greatest learnings that I've grown into even more is really positioning our both our ministries and our church around speaking to and helping people in the broken places in their lives.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well Vegas is kind of to quote Dickens, The Tale of Two Cities, because I think the way a lot of people experience Vegas, it's a big highlight for them. They head into town, they go take in some entertainment, casinos, whatever according to your flavor. And so it's this party city but you don't minister so much to the weekend crowd or the tourist crowd, you've got all the people who

actually live in Vegas and talk about the underbelly of the city and the part of the city that you see on a regular basis.

Jud Wilhite: Well, yeah there are two Las Vegases. There's the tourist side, 250,000 plus people coming in and out every weekend. But what most people don't realize is there's just a larger Las Vegas region that's just over two million people that live here. And they may work on or around the strip but outside of work and a few moments where maybe they're going out on a date or doing something special or they're taking friends. Most of us end up on the strip a lot but it's usually with friends from out of town. And it's just a different, and we all know how to navigate the Las Vegas boulevard without every driving on it. You stay ... you know because of traffic and everything, you know all the back roads, all the ins and outs, all the cubbies, all the basement entrances. We've got all that stuff wired up if you're local. So, that's part of the dynamic but yeah a lot of people have an impression that Vegas is just this crazy town, crazy life, and doing church there is just crazy. And the reality is two million people are every day normal people.

Jud Wilhite: It's a relatively normal city with all the normal broken things, it's got it's own unique dynamics. I remember one time walking outside at three in the morning and my neighbor had just gotten off work and he's washing his car in the driveway. I'm like "It's three in the morning dude." But he's out washing his car, I'm like "I'm going back to bed." I just didn't know what all that sound was.

Carey Nieuwhof: I was gonna say what were you doing up at 3:00 AM? It was all the noise.

Jud Wilhite: No, I'm just waking up "What's going on, what's happening?" So there are differences like you can get a five star steak at 3:00 in the morning. That kind of just gets in the air like everything is 24/7 and you can always kind of have access to ... from food to groceries to anything. So when I'm in other cities and everything closes at 10:00 I'm like "What? How did this even happening? How can they [crosstalk 00:13:52]"

Carey Nieuwhof: Or where I live and it closes at 7:00. Yeah.

Jud Wilhite: How can everything not be open 24/7? So there are two Las Vegases and I always say hey, Vegas gets it's reputation in part not from the people who live here but from people that are from your listeners cities. They get on planes, they fly into Vegas on the weekend. They act like they would never act at home. And then they fly back home and it was a great weekend and you can't live that way consistently. So they slide back into normal life. But then I feel like we kind of get the reputation when hey, that really wasn't local people that did all that stuff.

Carey Nieuwhof: I know when we've talked about this before both on the podcast and also just privately one on one, there's a lot of heartbreak in Vegas, isn't there? If you talk to the people who are working on the strip or the people who just like Vegas is

their city and that's what they do. Would you say it's disproportionate amounts of addiction, or loneliness, or despair, or it's typical America these days?

Jud Wilhite: Well Vegas is definitely the city of broken dreams. There's no doubt. One artist said, I don't believe it was from a faith standpoint but his sort of metaphor for Vegas was a forgotten beat up, stuffed doll laying by the side of the road. That's the picture, this rag doll that's been through it. That in many ways, I think there are some trends that we've seen in Vegas that probably forecasts what's coming to America, you know?

Carey Nieuwhof: Tell me about that.

Jud Wilhite: Well, I just think. I think ... for instance, years ago and I mean over ten years ago, I remember we had a moment where we looked at all of our children's numbers and our children's names, and we started comparing them with the names of husband and wife families who would bring their kids to church. And this was over ten years ago. We kind of crossed this line where the majority of our families did not have the same last names as either one another or their kids ... like there was the amount of traditional families was in the minority over a decade ago and that's even more now. So, in our world, you don't find a whole lot of people that haven't already been divorced once or twice. Relationships broken up and all the pain and struggle that goes through that. And I feel like that dynamic there are many other communities that are a little more stable in a lot of ways as it relates to that but it's slowly starting to shake and unravel.

Carey Nieuwhof: What are some other trends you've either seen in the last decade or you're seeing now that you're like "Huh, that's different."?

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, I mean I think one of the biggest, it's not different, I think the biggest trend ... I've sat with Christian, Jewish, Muslim, religious leaders in the Las Vegas area all of them will say the number one thing that we're facing in our city is related to addiction. And I think whether it's opioid, I just think there's a huge underbelly in our country, we all know it's there but it's a big problem. It's probably a much bigger problem in our churches than we realize. I mean I wouldn't be surprised if we don't have soccer moms and board members and everybody else across America's churches that are actually caught up in addictions in their own life that are really destructive to their health and moving into a very dangerous place but nobody knows.

Carey Nieuwhof: I've interviewed a lot of rural pastors, multi site, going into the Midwest and the south and it seems the smaller the town the deeper the addictions. And obviously that's also Vegas, but yeah I think ... I wonder, you know, I'd be curious your take on that. Why do you think our addiction rate seems to be soaring? I mean you have that as part of your story which you've told very publicly that breaking free and finding Christ was a huge part of your identity but why do you think it seems to be getting worse, not better?

Jud Wilhite: Well we're definitely, in Vegas, we're selling a lie in many ways that you can have your cake and eat it too. And you can do it every day and not gain weight. You know? But no, if you do that every day you're gonna be huge and get diabetes and it's not gonna be pretty. Right? But that's the message that we're always sending and even in the casinos, the people that work there, you would think people that work at casinos don't gamble. Because you would think they'd look around and realize, okay there's only one sort of team winning here, ultimately, and that's the team that built the billion dollar casino, right?

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, yeah. They're gonna win. They're gonna win.

Jud Wilhite: But the research actually shows people that work in casinos gamble a lot.

Carey Nieuwhof: Really?

Jud Wilhite: So they're around in all the time and it gets in the air and it gets normalized and they just start engaging in it. It's surprising to me but that's human nature and I feel like with addiction, it's a way that we're trying to deal with our brokenness and our pain. I think it's probably in part a way that we're dealing with it as God has been removed more and more from a center focus in our culture. And we're trying to find ways to deal with that brokenness.

Carey Nieuwhof: I would have the same diagnosis Jud that I think the more we remove God from the fabric of our every day life in our culture, the more desperately we don't know what to do with the pain. And we don't know what to do with the loneliness. Isn't that interesting? What does this because ... I mean I follow you pretty closely and I see you as a beacon of hope. I mean you just bring hope weekend after weekend after weekend. I love what you guys are doing at Central. And you lead a very large church. How many locations now? It seems to be growing every time I look.

Jud Wilhite: We're at ten different physical locations and then we meet on top of that ten different physical prisons around the country where we have campuses. So, 20 locations all together.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's incredible. And don't you have one like in Australia, or Hawaii, or something like that?

Jud Wilhite: Australia, Morelia, Mexico, Florida, Nevada, Arizona. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's so cool. And how many people would you reach on a typical weekend these days in person?

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, no our average live attendance non preacher count, I think our average for the last quarter was right at 20,000 ... 19,700 and something.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's exceptional.

Jud Wilhite: Some weeks it'll be in the low 20s and some weeks it'll be where you feel like ... as you get bigger the numbers swing even more. You know I have a weekend where I'm like what happened? Where'd everybody go?

Carey Nieuwhof: Guess last week wasn't really that good, right?

Jud Wilhite: That's right. It was like my best message ever. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once talked about God's method of accountability and he said over years at Westminster Chapel he'd give this message and he'd walk out and say "That was the best message I've ever given and next week it's gonna be record attendance, people standing outside." And the next week they'd be down, like 20 percent. He's like "What the heck?" And then he'd give a message that was ... he'd walk out go "That was the worst message I've ever given. That didn't make any sense, it didn't connect, nobody's coming back to church." And the next week they'd be up ten percent. He just said God did that to him for forty years and he finally realized this is God's method of accountability. That made me realize it's not about me, it's all about God. I'm just on His team, and on His page.

Carey Nieuwhof: You're preaching to a bunch of choir members right now. For sure Jud.

Jud Wilhite: It's easier to hear those numbers and go like ... it's just easy to get false impressions about it ... it doesn't matter how big your ministry, or how many locations you have, or how many people attend, you are never going to find contentment and happiness in that number or that size. You have to find that in Christ and Christ alone. And you have to be grounded in who you're called to be in your identity or you're going to be on this hamster wheel that it will never be enough.

Carey Nieuwhof: So here's a question I want to get to preaching and communication but when you have numbers like that circling 20,000 does it make it worse? Like you look back and say "Oh man, when it was like 3,000, 5,000 it was so much easier." Or does it make it feel like weight is just heavier?

Jud Wilhite: There's definitely ... like I don't think I could ... I've been at Central 15 years and we've grown from around five or six thousand up to this place from ... it was already a large church when I got here and we've turned over pretty much all of those people, the vast majority, you know over 15 years it's just a different church right? But that whole journey like I certainly couldn't step into what I do today 15 years ago from nothing. It's almost like a frog in the kettle and the heat gets turned up but you don't realize it because you're just sort of in it. And I kind of think that's God's way of preparing us. We've been through some ... it has not always been up and to the right for us. It has not been the kind of Outreach Magazine highlight reel story for us. We've had some down and to the left years. We had some really rough years that we navigated as a leader.

Jud Wilhite: All of that I think was God preparing me and our team for to be able to shoulder what was still to come. But to answer your question, look the bigger you are

everything gets exaggerated so the criticism, there's more. Yeah, the encouragement there's more, right? The praise, there's more. The people that love to attack and shoot arrows, there's more. The cynics, there's more. Everything gets exaggerated and so that's real. But I think for me, that identity journey that we all go on in our spiritual lives and it's a life long journey, right? Continues to just be really huge from a leadership standpoint. It doesn't matter how big you are, you can always look at a church that's bigger and say "Why aren't we like them? Why can't we be like them? Why can't we ..." It's just a hamster wheel you will never get off of.

Jud Wilhite: I want to grow, I want to be healthy, I want to reach more people, I want to see our impact grow for God's fame and God's glory but I have to dissociate that as much as practical from my own identity about who I am or it's crushing and even heavier.

Carey Nieuwhof: There's a quote I remember, this probably goes back 15 years or so but do you remember when Ted Turner donated a billion dollar to the UN?

Jud Wilhite: Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: Do you remember? That happened a long time ago. Anyway, he got interviewed about it and I remember reading the piece at the time and the question was "Doesn't that make you feel like amazing? To have that much wealth that you can donate a billion dollars to the UN?" And Ted Turner was quoted as saying "Feel great?" Like he says "Yeah, well, compared to Bill Gates I feel like I have nothing."

Jud Wilhite: That's right. That's right.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's very, very true. I'm curious and answer this as you feel comfortable but what do the critics say? When you've reached so many people and you've got all those locations and you're making a positive impact, what is the grist for their mill these days?

Jud Wilhite: Well I think people ... they can take a lot of ... it just depends on who the critics are.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Jud Wilhite: If it's the church critics that don't live in Vegas and don't walk in our world and don't sort of navigate what we're navigating well the church critics they love to attack any kind of high production value in churches or sort of reduce, hey because you did a secular song or you covered a song, or you're somehow you're less than, you compromise the truth, you don't give the gospel. All this stuff. And I remember we had a secular, non believing journalist come to our church and he'd never been there. He'd heard about it throughout the city. And

he said when he went in he felt like the pastor walks out, he goes "He looks like a roadie from Nickelback." I'm like "Okay."

Carey Nieuwhof: Ouch.

Jud Wilhite: No but he was actually like saying this could be really good. This is different, this is gonna be awesome. And then I did this whole message and in the end he goes "I'm just so disappointed in this whole experience." And he said "If you want to know pastor Jud Wilhite's opinion ... see the bible." And that's how he ended his article. And he was slamming me. But I'm like "Thank you, that was the greatest backhanded compliment somebody could've ever given me." And that's what I would say to anybody, even to the few critics that we really had, I'm just like hey, look under the hood and you're gonna find we're a lot more than a great light show and a great special music. There's real life change and ministry going on and real discipleship happening in people's lives.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, I've asked a lot of leaders this recently so I want to ask you but when you hear those voices and obviously, that one was a backhanded compliment which is awesome. But you know when you hear the critics how do you not let that get you down? Because I talk to so many leaders as you do Jud and they just live in that place where they can't get past those voices. I'm just wondering what your self talk is like.

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, I think it's hard. My wife is my part time therapist for some of this stuff. I really get down, I find myself in the kitchen just talking and it's really to just verbalize some of this stuff. But yeah, no I think it's a challenge I have to regularly remind myself that I'm here as long as God would have me be here and I'm here to serve Him as long as He would have me serve Him. My day will come to an end and my run will come to an end. God willing I'll finish well wherever he's got me. But I think the more I've lived with a sense of surrender the more it's helped me. So, started years ago doing a simple practice that I heard Rick Warren talk about. I mean this was 20 something years ago. But I stole this and I've done it for the past 20 years and it's a simple thing that has really helped me. When I drive off our church property I just open my hand and I say the same prayer. I say "God I just give it all to you. I'm going home. I give you the marriages that are hurting, I give you the staff tensions that we're facing. I give you the emails that I'm angry about. I give you all of this stuff."

Jud Wilhite: And it's been helpful to me ... I've been here 15 years, I hope I'm here a long time. I've seen us through the Vegas recession, the great recession which hit Vegas particularly hard and a lot of things that I've proven I don't run when it gets hard. But at the same time one of the ways I've stayed is I'm willing to walk whenever I sense that God says that's it, we're done. And so that kind of open hand acknowledges. I'm a part timer, I'm all in but I'm a part timer God. I serve at Your disposal. The critics will say what they say, I can't control that. People can say what they ... you know what? The minute You release me from this ministry, I don't want to be in the way, I want to get out of the way for You to advance the kingdom and take it to the next level. So, I'm humble in this

moment God, I'm open, I give this to you. That's my every day practice driving off the church property.

Carey Nieuwhof: I love that. I've never heard that before. And you know what that would be really helpful I think I'm going to start doing that even if it's walking up the stairs from my home office.

Jud Wilhite: Otherwise everything in the church ministry, especially if you're a senior pastor, everything in the church ministry becomes personal.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yep.

Jud Wilhite: And this is where it's very toxic for our soul and it's very challenging. And it is personal, but look every staff member that leaves doesn't leave because you lack something. You know every family that leaves, that's not about your not teaching. Nine times out of ten, 99 times out of 100, all that stuff is about them more than it's even about you. And their journey, and what they're going ... no matter what they say, it's usually about their own stuff. And how they project that. So but for me I take all that stuff personally right? I'm like I failed, I failed this, I couldn't get this done, or I couldn't get that done. Or I wasn't good enough to get this accomplished. And having that moment each day of reminding myself hey, I'm here because I'm called and I'm commissioned. And if that call and commission ends then that's up to the Lord and God make that clear to me, I'm willing to walk when that time comes.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow. What has kept you there for 15 years because that's another frequently asked question we get is how do I know when it's time to go so how have you sensed that no, I'm right in the middle of my calling right now in good times or bad times I'm still here?

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, I mean I feel like it's just for me it's frankly it's really subjective. In the end it's kind of you know what you know. And I felt like when I came to Vegas we were called here. I remember saying to my wife, we didn't unpack the boxes for the first year. We left them. You know? Because I'm like I'm probably not gonna survive but I didn't necessarily feel like I was called to survive, I just felt like I was called to go. And we both sensed that. That has never really lessened yet, in my heart. Like I feel as called as ever and it's just a subjective thing, I don't really know how to answer that question except for-

Carey Nieuwhof: No, it's a good answer.

Jud Wilhite: I think my prayer is like God if that time comes to an end, I just want to acknowledge that this ministry has never been about me, and it is not about me now, and someday I will be long forgotten and nobody will remember my name but I pray that Your name and Your fame continue to come out from this place and move out to the world. And I'm willing to be Your chess piece on Your chess board God. Move me wherever you want me. I'm willing. I think that prayer has

been really powerful but it hasn't ever, it's actually increased my sense of calling over the years and not lessened it.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's a great prayer. That's super practical. Thanks Jud. Wow, lots to think about there. And really, really helpful. So preaching in Vegas, communicating in Vegas what are some principles you've learned about communicating and preaching in the entertainment capital of America?

Jud Wilhite: Well, I think the number one principle that I've learned is authenticity trumps everything. And we love to think truth trumps everything but if we're gonna really talk about where people are when they walk in I'm not even sure they're looking for truth. In Vegas they're not. In Vegas they're looking for hope. If anybody goes to church in Vegas, it's not because their family pressures them, it's not because it's the cultural thing to do, this will actually hurt your career in Vegas if you go to church and like change. Right?

Carey Nieuwhof: It's like you're going where?

Jud Wilhite: It's not that it's a negative thing it's more of a neutral thing, you know? But people just don't wake up and go like "Aw man, it's Sunday morning where are we gonna go to church?" That does not happen. So if they go to church at all, it's because of some need they feel in their life and what they're really seeking as hope. So I say all that, I think truth is critical and very important.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh yeah.

Jud Wilhite: I teach the bible every week. I hold the bible, I actually hold a bible in my hand still like some old 75 year old preacher because that's still my foundation right? I use it, it's like a prop, I don't need it, but it's important for me for people to see that because I value it. So yes, truth is very important but I think authenticity is what opens people's hearts so that you can share truth with them. Authenticity in my experience trumps everything, and what I mean is they're not so concerned if I have all the right answers, they're not so concerned if I have it all figured out. They want to know I'm real. And if I'll be real about my pain points and my struggle then that will help them lower some of their barriers they've built up in their heart. And if I can ... and so like in New York and other cities, well that's too broad of a statement because New York is really like hundreds of cities all in one, right?

Jud Wilhite: In many cities that are more intellectually driven where there's a higher education kind of factor, often the way to a person's heart is through their head. But that is not the case in Vegas and I think for much of America. You know the way to a person's head is through their heart. And first they open their heart to you and then they're willing to think with you and go down the road towards truth. So for me in Vegas preaching and communicating has always been a realization that the very first challenge I have is to help people lower those defenses enough to let me into their heart and if they will let me into their heart

even just a little bit and lean in then I have an opportunity to lead them to the gospel.

Carey Nieuwhof: How do you do that?

Jud Wilhite: So for me it's pretty straight forward. Almost every message I give I, from the very beginning start with something out of my own life personally. It always leads to a discussion about a problem that we're going to be addressing but it's always personal. It's my struggle with the problem. I'm never the hero of my stories. And people want to hear about your pain way more than they want to hear about your victories. And so I feel like the more I can just come out and be honest about ... like I'm teaching about the Holy Spirit this next week, and I was thinking about the Holy Spirit and how I've done Seminary, I've been to all the classes, I've read all the books, I've been all over the map, I've been super conservative, I've been Pentecostal. I've been back in the middle. I think about my journey over 30 years as a follower of Jesus, right?

Jud Wilhite: I've been in a lot of environments, seen a lot of things. But when it comes to the Holy Spirit and I'm teaching all of this, there's actually this moment of where I realize like what does that really mean for me every day? Practically and there's some things I can say, you know almost daily I ask the Holy Spirit to fill me. And I try to be aware of the Holy Spirit's leadership which is a subjective thing. I do feel like sometimes, the Holy Spirit's given me supernatural words or key gifting things in specific moments. But so much of it is an absolute mystery to me and really hard to even talk about.

Jud Wilhite: And that's what I'm gonna say this weekend. Like to say anything else in Vegas is like when you lose chips. But if you will trust people enough to just be real with them, they will lean in. And so I also think that's powerful because if you create a ... you reap the culture you sow over time. So if you sow an authentic culture, and a loving culture, over time that's what people are going to show you as a leader. They're gonna show you grace, and love, and give you room to be authentic, and so I'm also trying to sow those seeds. But if I can get ... so I'll tell a personal story, usually out of my own life leading to a problem that we're gonna be talking about and how I'm wrestling with that problem right now in my life, then that sort of sets up me to ... people to kind of lean in a little bit and acknowledge, yeah I go through that too. I relate to that.

Jud Wilhite: Because the most powerful illustrations we tell are the illustrations where our shared experience overlaps the listeners shared experience. And so if I can do that and lead them into a problem that we all share together and I'm in it with them then they'll open their hearts, hopefully to the power of God's word and the truth of His word to kind of help all of us.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's super helpful. Do you have a line that you draw about when it's appropriate to share something and when it's like no, that's too raw or I probably shouldn't share that?

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, I do but ... I have a fairly developed sense of where that is but it's not like I have a rigid framework for it. But there's definitely some ... I think there's just I try to put myself in the situation of saying if I'm sitting out there I'd love for my pastor to be real but there's some things about my pastor I don't want to know. I don't want to know about their sex life, I don't want to know about like right? All this ... it's like that's just too much information and if you're going down a road that bumps up against that, I'll often think would I want to know that if I'm sitting out there or is that just too much information?

Carey Nieuwhof: That's good filter. So, you recently spent some time looking at your cultural and ministry assumptions, Jud, at Central in Vegas and you came up with a new and refined strategy and approach to ministry. I'd love for you to share what you learned through that exercise.

Jud Wilhite: Well we just went through this whole process of re looking at our strategy, our mission as a church. It's the great commission, and so however you word it. But it's to introduce people to Jesus and help them follow Him. And that's pretty locked in, that's pretty basic, right? But we began to really think about how do we do that and so a few things that were powerful for us is we spent quite a bit of time talking about the current assumptions that we have of the people in our culture and in our church. And once, and I'll share some of these assumptions with you but once we came up with the list of assumptions the changes to our strategy just flowed naturally out of it. So part of my learning in all of this is your assumptions about your church, your culture, your city, where you're called really in many ways if you get those right, if everybody agrees and we spent a lot of time going around the room. Asking other staff members, team members, are we right? Are we wrong?

Jud Wilhite: Once you feel like those assumptions are locked in, it felt like the strategy rolled out of that. So here are some of our assumptions that helped enlighten our strategy, 99 percent of our engagement with people at Central is through the weekend experience. That's a big assumption but ...

Carey Nieuwhof: That is because everyone's talking about trying to engage midweek but you're saying 99 percent and this is should or is?

Jud Wilhite: No, we try to ... is. Yeah, I'm not saying we don't try. I'm not saying we don't have group life and all of that, I'm just saying 99 percent of the people that know we are and interface with us their primary kind of window for that is through a weekend experience. It's just an assumption, right? Here's another assumption and this I think will be different in different areas but I feel like this is a fairly generous one for the Las Vegas area particularly, the people will give us two to four live attendance opportunities in a month. Two to four live attendance opportunities in a month. So if they go to a small group that's one. If they go to ... we did a big, we sold out Park Theater on Las Vegas Boulevard. It's where Lady Gaga's gonna do her residency and Bruno Mars performs in all this so our worship team Central Live, we sold it out a couple of weeks ago and it was an amazing moment. It was kind of like a crusade on the Las Vegas

Boulevard. So lots of people come to faith, loved it, but the next weekend because we did that on Wednesday our church attendance was annihilated.

Jud Wilhite: Because people gave us that opportunity, they did it.

Carey Nieuwhof: It's like "Hey man, I came. I'm not coming back."

Jud Wilhite: They'll be back in a few weeks. So, I'm not saying again, this is not a statement about this is how it should be please don't these wrong. These are assumptions about how things are ... so two to four live attendance opportunities in a month feels very generous. I think it maybe one to three. But we throw out two to four as a generous, now we have people that will come to everything we do but that's the vast minority. You're talking about 10 percent of people or less that come to everything, at least in our world. We're talking about the majority here.

Jud Wilhite: Another assumption is we journey with people from negative ... so if you think up spirituality and spiritual growth on a continuum that starts at negative five and then goes negative four, negative three, negative two, negative one, and then zero, and that's the cross. That's where a person comes to faith in Christ, zero. And then plus one, plus two, plus three, plus four, plus five. So if you see that on a continuum where plus five is like the apostle Paul and negative five is I don't know like a guitarist in a death metal band. They don't want to have anything to do with Jesus, God and they love to sing songs about Satan, I don't know. So if you think of this sort of extreme polarizations, right, our primary audience are people that are minus three to plus two. Our primary window are and I'm not saying this should be true of every ministry, or every church again these are our assumptions but there's a reason I'm giving you all these assumptions because then I'm gonna tell you where they led for us. That's our primary window.

Jud Wilhite: Now we do some things, we do three key things for people that are plus three to plus five, we do a champions network, we do a school of ministry and leadership, and we have ministry partners which are volunteer staff. And basically if you're plus three to plus five we want to move you into a volunteer staff role and have you serving back to the negative three to plus two kind of window. So all of these things framed up our strategy and so our strategy when we kind of rehashed it is very simple it's gonna sound like it was scribbled out on a napkin when I was running on the treadmill. It's so basic they're gonna be like "That's it? That's the simplest thing in the world everybody does that. That's dumb." But this simplicity for us took hours, and hours, and hours, and hours, and hours, and hours, and hours. And the process is what's so important. So our strategy became this. Attend a weekend.

Jud Wilhite: I think it's a false assumption now that people attend church on a regular basis, I'm talking about believers.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Jud Wilhite: And certainly for us nobody's thinking when they come to faith, 70 percent of people in our church came to faith in our church, so don't have a lot of church experience. Nobody's thinking I should go to church next week. They've made this commitment but you have to teach them that this is a valuable, important thing and so attend a weekend. And we say attend a weekend to experience God, invite a friend is the second part to share hope, join a team is the third part to make a difference, and then give generously is the fourth part to rescue others.

Jud Wilhite: So that's it. If we can get everybody in our church to attend a weekend, to invite a friend to come along with them, to join a team, and many of these are serving teams, some of them are groups teams that meet in homes, but in the past we put all this effort and energy on trying to get people to meet in homes, meet in groups in homes, and for the amount of impact it actually had, oh man, it's just so much work, and effort, and energy for so little actual fruit. You know? It's unbelievable.

Carey Nieuwhof: Do you see greater fruit when people serve then when they're in a group?

Jud Wilhite: We see people that serve, they are more active in their church attendance, they give more faithfully financially, significantly more than people in groups and in general we see that they're more engaged in the ministry. So the shift for us under this whole idea of join a team is we're gonna continue to do groups, we're gonna continue to offer groups ministry but the shift is we're creating hundreds of weekend serving teams and these teams are where people will get their sense of community. They may meet a little bit early or stay a little bit late as a group and do things as a group but they're serving primarily as their way of giving back.

Carey Nieuwhof: Fascinating.

Jud Wilhite: I was having a conversation with a friend of mine whose daughter's in volleyball and we're talking about how it's amazing that we have such a hard time getting people to come to our church events, mid week events and other things but he gets a call like the day of that the volleyball team has a pregame warm up match over here and amazingly every parent on that volleyball team can drop everything and have their kid there.

Carey Nieuwhof: True.

Jud Wilhite: And so we said "Why?" Well it's because their kids are needed. If their kid isn't there, the team can't play, and the whole team's depending on them being there. So we're trying to lay that thinking over church. People need to be part of a team and they need to be needed. So ...

Carey Nieuwhof: Isn't that interesting because a lot of leaders when we've had this conversation are doing the opposite and they're saying you can't make people attend so we

have to find other ways to engage people. But you're actually going against the grain and saying no, we want you to pop this up in priority.

Jud Wilhite: Well, yeah, I mean we have about 50,000 people that watch us online every weekend so we have a huge online, well huge is relative, right? But I mean ...

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, no those are real people.

Jud Wilhite: So we have a lot ... so I acknowledge that a lot of people are engaging online that that's gonna be even more important for how we create tools and resources for people. I think we're comfortable enough after over ten years with an online campus of sitting back and saying "If you can your best pathway to real life engagement and change is gonna be with community."

Carey Nieuwhof: I'm nodding, yep.

Jud Wilhite: So we're trying to get people to slide more often into community. But ...

Carey Nieuwhof: How do you do that? I'm curious, what are the encouragements to get in the building and engage?

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, I think so for us or one thing we're doing is creating a lot of teams around serving opportunities that work towards the weekend. And this is new like. I'm not giving, like I can't even ... it might not even work.

Carey Nieuwhof: We haven't got six months of data on this one.

Jud Wilhite: I can promise you that the data will lead us though. And if in the end we go well that didn't work, look it won't be the first time for me Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof: Nor me.

Jud Wilhite: Drawing board. Let's do all this over again. New assumptions. That doesn't work. But yeah, it's just retooling a lot of serving opportunities around our leads and continuing our groups ministry but acknowledging that we can't even afford to staff it at a level of what it really needs to have 75 percent of people in groups, or even 50 percent in groups in our world. Like one of our assumptions that I didn't mention is we're best when we do ministry that is simple. And that's because for us, in Vegas really most churches in Vegas have an even more significant resource challenge than churches in other cities and parts of the world. And I think in the West in general that's true, you know in America. Like as you get closer to the west it just becomes more of a challenge. But certainly that's true for us. So there is this dynamic where you want to step out in faith, push yourself financially but at the same time you go, but we're at our best and we do what we can afford, and we don't overextend ourselves.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, oh that's good. Now, you've also rethought culture recently. Or you've been thinking a lot about culture. Talk about church culture and how do you create a healthy one, particularly at the scale that you're at.

Jud Wilhite: Well I think for us, there's a few key, key elements and I'll just try to be brief but one thing for me I've found a lot of truth in the idea of having really clear values as the leader. I have to set the values of our culture. And values in many ways can drive and shape culture in really, really powerful ways. I read this quote by Ann Rhoades she said this, "Leaders drive the values, values drive the behaviors, behaviors drive the culture, culture drives the performance." There's a lot there, right? You've got to process and think about that for a minute. But I feel like there's a lot of truth in this too. But yeah, we drive the values that then begin to drive the behaviors, that then begin to shape the culture, that then begin to shape your overall effectiveness, right?

Jud Wilhite: And so for me, when there's been disunity in the church, disunity on our staff, a lot of confusion, a lot of frustration, it's often because I, as a leader, have not been clear enough about our values and instilling them deeply enough into the fabric.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow.

Jud Wilhite: So I've had to go back and get really clear about our values, what do we value, why are those things important. We came up with nine different staff values and we didn't focus so much on church wide values, we have a few of those that we gave to everybody. But I feel like if our staff, what we call our ministry partners, our volunteer staff, our interns, if that layer of people will hang onto those values and get them, then it will sort of take care of itself. It'll bleed out into the larger fabric of our church. We created a yearly development and coaching plan, and instead of a review system, we called it more of a development, a coaching plan. It's all built around the values. So everybody gets graded on a scale of one to ten on each of the nine values. And that's their job performance, so that they're meeting every six months about that.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's pretty cool. And those values are unique to you. Right? You didn't download something from the internet, or borrow them from another church, like in the same way that you looked at your assumptions and then the strategy, you tried to define what Central was about?

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, absolutely. I mean we spent the time kind of working through. I'll give them to you because they're simple and they're straight forward.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh great. Can we put those in the show notes?

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, yeah. This is ... yes. Again, the danger of seeing any other church's value is skipping the most important step which is you doing it yourself, you know? So my only warning to pastors is like I know you're busy, I know you're

overwhelmed, and I know it's "Yeah, we need values, we'll just cut and paste these. These look good." It's way better to just go through the process on your own. There's so much you get through the process.

Carey Nieuwhof: Totally agree. Because we did that in my company, we did that at our church, and there is no substitute for you and your team. But still it's good to even get a compass bearing on what someone else has done and said "Oh that's what it could be like."

Jud Wilhite: Yeah. And I will say before I give you these, I think we probably have too many. And I feel like there's a few of these that could be reframed. We also have like the principle, the value in a two or three word statement and then we have like a creative idea around it that goes with some things around our building and some different props and things so it gets a little layered. So let me just give you the straight forward idea, not so much the creative wrapping.

Carey Nieuwhof: Totally.

Jud Wilhite: First value is simply this. Follow Jesus. We should start there.

Carey Nieuwhof: Good one.

Jud Wilhite: Value two is love people. That we invite everyone into our church family. We love them whether or not they believe or behave the same way we do. I think that's important. Dan Haglan years ago said "Hey churches for 50 years took the frame work of first you behave, and then you believe, and eventually you can belong. If you behave well enough and believe well enough you can belong as part of our church community."

Carey Nieuwhof: So true.

Jud Wilhite: You know we've flipped that whole thing upside down as a lot of churches have. And we've said "No, first you belong whether you believe or not." And I'm not saying you belong to Universal Church of Jesus Christ. But you can belong as part of our community as a human being. We have way more in common as human beings than we don't. So you can just belong and then we hope you'll come to a place where you believe and then eventually you'll start to become all that God desires for you to be. But that's that sort of love people value.

Jud Wilhite: The third area is celebrate stories. That basically our stories are our loudest instruments for sharing our purpose so that others could be rescued. Fourth area is lead yourself. I'll never forget years ago I had breakfast with this senior pastor and I wasn't yet a senior pastor and I was already overwhelmed as an associate pastor and this person seemed to have it all together, they're leading all this stuff. And I remember saying "How do you do it? How do you keep it all together. I'm overwhelmed." I'll never forget, he put his fork down and he goes, "Grow up. Lead yourself. If you don't lead yourself no one else will." He took

another bite of breakfast and I was like I just got slapped, I just got slapped at breakfast that's what just happened.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow.

Jud Wilhite: But I never forgot it. Yes, lead yourself. And so that's a huge message. The biggest thing that I try to teach our staff and our core leaders is if you are depleted spiritually that is your own fault and responsibility, deal with it. You know?

Carey Nieuwhof: Yes. Yeah. No you're right. You are responsible for your own spiritual growth. I couldn't agree more.

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, yeah. Fifth is work as a team. Sixth is always honor. So honor can be distorted in different churches. We talk about that right? But one of the things we try to talk about is 360 degree honor. That on our staff and with our leaders we want to honor up, honor down, and honor all around. Honor the person to my left, to my right, as my team members, honor the person below me. I honor the person above me and honor I think is healthy and thrives in a culture when it's honor all the way around. I think so often over, where it gets distorted is where leaders demand honor down line towards them but then don't honor the people around them.

Carey Nieuwhof: Never thought of it that way, a whole bunch of stuff just clicked. That makes so much sense.

Jud Wilhite: Right. Because if you're not actually showing the honor you expect to receive, you're just a hypocrite.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's exactly it. Or it's like the person with the most spoils wins. Right? So you're at the top so it all flows to you.

Jud Wilhite: Yeah. Number seven, similar, and we actually have two that are very similar, this has probably been my highest personal value and that's be loyal. And so I just, I always go back to where Paul says "Follow me as I follow Christ." And it was an expectation that as long as he's following Christ and true to his calling and not acting outside of his a morality framework and a calling framework. He expected people to follow him. And I expect our team at Central to be loyal to me and loyal to one another. Which means gossip of any kind is a sin towards, staff gossip about one another, team gossip towards one another, gossip period is a sin. We've got to watch each other's back and protect each other. So, pedal to the medal. That's number eight which is actually do whatever it takes.

Carey Nieuwhof: I like that pedal to the metal, that's awesome.

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, whatever it takes. And then have fun. Work hard, play hard. Have fun. So those are our kind of nine values and again we can put these in the show notes

but the important thing is it isn't the values it's that we went through the process.

Carey Nieuwhof: And then they're owned, right? It's not like you came down from the mountain. It's like here you go guys, these are our values. You share them with your team.

Jud Wilhite: We shape them as a team. And then we took them to the larger team to get input and then we came back and went over them again. And then we rolled them out publicly. You know? Because then it's shared, it's a shared kind of framework and for us I think what was so powerful is, once we created a development and coaching plan around that, once we brought clarity to those values then we started saying things like no staff member should come on our team who doesn't represent this already in heart and in their life. No ministry partner kind of volunteer staff member should be asked to step on because you're kind of invited into that circle. Unless they represent this heart and as we began to dial it down where people didn't represent that heart, they would be talked to. Some difficult conversations around that. It started to change the culture because it started to become really apparent, this is what we do and this is what we don't do. And all of a sudden there was a very small group of people that stuck out like a sore thumb.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah.

Jud Wilhite: They just didn't fit the culture and they eventually needed to transition on to where God was leading them and it became a revelatory kind of process for us. But once we, once we really began to let those values sink in and then once we started to police those values. You know like owning them at a deep level, and model those values. These are values that I try to live. And by the way when I teach these values to our church, the most powerful thing you can do as a communicator is to not always get up and tell people what to do.

Jud Wilhite: Communicators we love to get up and be like "You need to invite your friends to come to church." Listen, it's way more powerful if you get up and say "Hey, this week let me tell you about my friend John who I've been praying for and I saw him and it had been awhile since I'd slipped an invitation out there. And I said "Hey John would you be willing to come to church with me this next weekend, we've got this going on or whatever." And then John says "No, I'm busy. I got things going on." Which that's actually a very powerful illustration because that's people's experience, often, right? You just tell people stories of you living the values weekend and week out and you don't have to tell people what to do. They will start.

Carey Nieuwhof: They will do it.

Jud Wilhite: You're leaders. They'll catch it. So values I do think they're taught but I also think they're caught, right? They're really gonna get in the culture, they're also

caught. So anyway, all that stuff has been important for us to maintain a healthy culture and to strive to protect it.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well and this is one of the reasons I just love having you on the podcast because I can't believe we're in the better part of an hour but I don't want to let you go, Jud, without talking a little bit about your personal journey as a leader. You know as well as I do there are some leaders listening and as valuable as all this stuff is, they're like "Dude. If we're just gonna sit down and have a cup of coffee, I would have to tell you I'm exhausted." And you went through a period of burnout, in your brand new book *Uncaged*, which I would recommend people pick up a copy. You talk about personal freedom and how God's promises have really helped you. But you've gone through periods of near burn out with the pace and the weight of ministry over this last decade and a half really feeling heavy. Can you talk to us about that Jud? I don't want to let this time go by without going there.

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, I think burnout is ... it's a huge issue. And every conference you go to it usually you know you hear somebody talk about it.

Carey Nieuwhof: I'm the burn out guy now. So I do the burnout talk.

Jud Wilhite: Yeah, it can be a little bit cliché but just so for me, I ... the thing about burnout that I've found so fascinating is when you're really depleted at that level you start to lose perspective. And you don't realize how depleted you are. And I used to look around at how people just would crash into the wall and their whole ministry and life would blow up and you're like "Bro, how could you let that happen?" And I think the truth is they ran out of perspective long before they ran off the road. And so they didn't have a framework anymore to even like you don't plan that but it just ... so for me ...

Carey Nieuwhof: So true.

Jud Wilhite: I got to a place a few years ago where I just stopped feeling. It's kind of a scary place to be but I just kind of lost my ability for a season to really feel anything. I just became numb. And I was watching these individuals get baptized and I was standing there and I was remembering how much I had changed. I was remembering that there was a time where I'd be celebrating this and high fiving everybody and intellectually I am. But emotionally I'm like dead inside. Like I don't even care. And that was a red flag for me. And I started to see other kind of red flags in my heart and life. And then around this time a few of my longer term close friends hit the wall. And had affairs, and blew up their marriages and everything kind of ... so I was scared enough to know like I have to talk to somebody about this because I don't want to do that. There's too much at stake in the kingdom, there's too much stake in our ministry, it's too many people depending on me and trusting me. I have to be honest.

Jud Wilhite: And so I was honest with our board of elders. I have a board and I told them not sure what's happening right now in my heart and in my life but I'm having a hard time feelings things and just emotionally I'm just really, really numb. So I ended up going to Blessings Ranch. Dr. John Walker and Dr. Charity Byers. Tremendous, both of them, psychologists and counselors who are believers who have worked with pastors and church leaders for decades now and he helped me pinpoint a couple of things that I think were very important in my journey. One was that it's not just the pace of ministry, I actually don't think the pace of ministry is the problem. I think it's the weight you carry at the pace that you run. And so if we can offload some of the emotional and spiritual weight, off of our shoulders to God, I think we can run the race.

Jud Wilhite: For me, the weight was becoming so heavy and the weight, I found out, was ... there was some cynicism that was growing in my heart towards the church and towards others. There was some frustration that was coming out, all these things were red flags and the reality was I had about 20 years of hurts that I had, little hurts, that I had never dealt with in ministry.

Jud Wilhite: Two decades worth and I promise you, you know this Carey, how many of us can say that's "Yep." Because we don't deal with this stuff as pastors right? We move on-

Carey Nieuwhof: No we're great, we're fine. Didn't really bother me.

Jud Wilhite: You know, and so I had about 20 years worth of this stuff that I had never processed or dealt with. People that you feel like betrayed you, people that you feel like has always said they'd be by your side and left the church or started a church down the street or whatever. You just go down the list, if you're in ministry long enough you'll go through all of it.

Carey Nieuwhof: Took people with them. Yeah.

Jud Wilhite: Don't think you won't, we all do. That's my learning is like oh, it's not that these were all just toxic leaders that brought this on themselves, this is just stuff that happens. You know? Wish I could tell you it didn't but after 25 years I've had a lot of those things happen under my watch as well. And had to be humbled and navigate it. Dr. Walker walked me through a process that's worth sharing. He said "I want you to write out a list of all the people that have hurt you in ministry over 25 years." And I think okay, so that was my homework for a week and I thought this is gonna be a really long list, man, there's gonna be pages, and pages, and pages of who have hurt me. And I came back and I gave him the list, I can only come up with like ten or it's less than ten, it wasn't very many. I'll just never forget he looked at me and he laughed. And I said "This should be so many more. I just can't think of them right now." And he said "Jud, it's always ten. Or five. Or three."

Jud Wilhite: And he said "The truth is what we do as leaders is over the decades we start to project the pain a few people have caused us onto everybody else. And we start to view other people with cynicism or skepticism because we've been hurt but we're not acknowledging all the people that have been good to us." He said "I want you to think about what this list means." He says, "This means thousands of people have been good to you in ministry. And only ten of them have really hurt you. Think about that over 25 ..." I was ... it just blew my ever loving mind.

Carey Nieuwhof: You're blowing my mind right now. I mean I've been ...

Jud Wilhite: It blew my mind you know? It's like I can trust people. I can love people freely, people are mostly good. People have been ... I don't mean this morally. I'm just saying like people that I've worked with in the church environment, leaders, yeah they frustrated me but for the most part, they've been great. And they've done what they could do and I don't know it just changed my whole attitude and perspective. Then he walked me through a process of forgiving those ten people talking to some of them if I needed to letting the past be the past, acknowledging the hurt and I'll tell you, every since then, it's just, it's felt like freedom. So I'm still running hard, we're all still running hard but I got rid of a 50 pound pack on my back. And it's changed how I'm running the race.

Carey Nieuwhof: I just want to underscore that. My burnout, because I had a similar thing and I was probably ground two of more of a halt than it sounds that you were but August of 2006 for me was what we called it was grave your losses. It's like all those losses that had piled up. And there were a lot of tears and if I had written a list it probably wouldn't have been that long either, like maybe ten names but my goodness that idea of just grieving that stuff in real time and even acknowledging that there's a hurt. Now for a decade I've been running a lot lighter and handling a lot more responsibility but it just doesn't feel as heavy as it used to. That is such a gift, that is such a gift Jud.

Jud Wilhite: It's a big deal, and I will tell you the scary thing about burn out and I've heard, we've talked about this Carey, I know you've been down this road but if you really hit the burnout wall, there's always a chance you're never gonna get put back together the same way again. And I spent, I went through this process of forgiveness. And then I began to really study the promises of God, personally, devotionally for me. This wasn't for a message series, this was just about me and God. You know? Like my own journey with God. Because I started thinking like what can I really hold onto here? Where are my feet planted? And really all we can hold onto is what God has promised us. And so that kind of led me to like well what exactly has he promised us? Forgiveness, eternal life, heaven, whatever, but what is the real promises of God in the bible and how do those affect me in my life.

Jud Wilhite: And that's where the book Uncaged really came out of. But it came out of a lot of this process and it was an 18 month journey for me to ... it was 18 months before I woke up on a Saturday morning and I remember saying like ... we have

Saturday night services so usually I wake up on Saturday morning and my first thought is like "Oh gosh, I gotta get that message dialed in. I've got to talk."

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh no it's Saturday.

Jud Wilhite: That's my first thought is like "Nobody knows what I carry on Saturday." Right, whatever. No college ... but I woke up and my first thought, first time in 18 months was I get to go to church tonight. I get to go with my people that I'm called to lead and love. But it took 18 months to get there and it was a long journey. The promises of God became huge for me. So the book *Uncaged* is the top eight promises of God that have meant so much to me personally. These are not the most obscure promises in the bible.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, you didn't find that one verse in the minor prophets. Okay.

Jud Wilhite: That wasn't my ... this was just out of my own ... in fact I started writing this book not as a book I just started a year long devotional study for my own spiritual journey, really coming from kind of a scary place emotionally of just feeling numb to this is what I'm gonna hang on to. This is what I'm gonna stake my life on. And some of these are like bumper sticker kinds of promises. Jeremiah 29:11 "I know the plans I have for you to give you a hope and a future." But hey man, when you are in the darkness that's the light you need to hang onto. That God still has a plan and a purpose and he hasn't given up on you. But one of the things I do in the book is I explore these around the context that they landed in. So Jeremiah 29:11 is great but Jeremiah 29:10 says for the next 70 years you're gonna stay in captivity.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, yeah, oh good. So you put them in context.

Jud Wilhite: The context changes everything. All they would've looked around and seen disaster and anything but a hope and a future. They were exiled and they were out of their homeland, Jerusalem and everything had been impacted and destroyed. Those are the people that God comes to and says I have a plan for you. A plan to give you a hope, future, but first 70 years, many of you are going to die in captivity, first you're gonna go through all this stuff in your life and here's what you need to do. And then he outlines it. Don't dwindle away, have children, plant gardens, build homes, work jobs, you know. In other words do your daily life and follow me faithfully until I bring the hope and the future.

Jud Wilhite: So that's what a big part of *Uncaged* was me being surprised with some of these promises that we anchor our lives on as you dig into the bible and go oh there's whole other layers here that help me understand what I can really expect from God.

Carey Nieuwhof: I want to close on this. There's a lot of assumptions we carry about God either articulated or unarticulated and how have God's promises helped you real on your expectations? It sounds like you had a pivot point in your ministry.

Jud Wilhite: The biggest shifts for me was around just what I think is the unifying promise of the bible. And it's not eternal life, it's not heaven as we often think of it as a place of no suffering or no pain. It's not forgiveness of sins, I think the overarching unifying promise of the bible is that we can experience the presence of God. Genesis first chapters God's walking with Adam and Eve in the garden, right? Then the fall happens, that presence that walking with, that intimacy has now been impacted by sin. Then you see the tabernacle emerge, the presence of God moving with the tabernacle and the Israelites. Then the temple, why is the temple significant? The presence of God is there. And Christ dies on the cross, the veil is torn and the temple it separates the holy of holy and the rest of the temple, the presence of God in a unique way is in us through the Holy Spirit, we the church community are the temple of the living God now where his presence dwells.

Jud Wilhite: And you get all the way to Revelation chapter 20 and the promise is this they will be my people and I will be their God. So, forgiveness isn't the primary promise, it's how the presence of God as a relationship gets restored in our lives. Eternal life isn't the primary promise. It's the duration that we get to experience the presence of God in heaven. The gift is the presence of God. And I think for me realizing ... my first chapter is just the presence is the promise. And we can expect it in part now in our life and ultimately in heaven. And I think in and of itself helped me reframe how I sort of saw God and his promises and what this whole thing was about. It's about me experiencing the presence of God in a way that that really sort of took fruition in my life as a leader was this, you know that old passage we've all quoted "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart."

Carey Nieuwhof: Of your heart. Yep.

Jud Wilhite: But for me it went back to the first part of that sentence. Just delight yourself in the Lord. That's really all you need to worry about. Like the presence is the promise and everything else then the weight I was carrying, the unforgiveness in my heart, the more I just delighted in God and worked through that process the more that just started getting lighter, and lighter, and lighter, and the more I feel like my expectations were aligned with what the ultimate promise really is, it's not that you're gonna grow a big church and have a huge impact. You might, but the promise is the presence of God in your life.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's so good. And isn't that where we all started? Pretty much.

Jud Wilhite: Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof: But you forget. But you forget.

Jud Wilhite: You forget. I make it about all this other crazy identity success stuff and all this stuff that just leads to frustration and discontentment.

Carey Nieuwhof: Oh Jud, this is why I love having you on. This is why I love hanging out. This is so, so rich. Thank you. People obviously you can get the book anywhere you buy books but if they want to drill down a little deeper where would they go, is there a particular site?

Jud Wilhite: They can always go to [JudWilhite.com](http://JudWilhite.com) and that links up to kind [inaudible 01:17:32] simple. Or [Centralonline.tv](http://Centralonline.tv) we've got Uncaged section and resources. And there's some group resources, there's some great small group videos of people who want to go through the promises of God in their group and kind of dig into some of those. So that's all available there.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well Jud, I so appreciate what you're doing. I love the way you're leading and I love that your heart keeps getting renewed. You're doing a great work in Vegas, and leaders if you're not following Jud, you need to be following Jud. And you need to be following not only him but his church because we're learning a lot at Connexus these days from you guys. I'm learning a lot from you as a leader, a mentor, a friend, and just want to thank you so much for everything you do Jud. I'm so grateful for you.

Jud Wilhite: Thank you Carey, man, appreciate you so much. And all that you do. It's amazing and I'm very grateful for your ministry and thanks for letting me be a part.

Carey Nieuwhof: My pleasure.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well that was so rich and Jud thanks for your transparency and your honesty. If you want more you can go to the show notes [CareyNieuwhof.com/episode245](http://CareyNieuwhof.com/episode245). We also have transcripts. We are back next week with some fresh episodes, yeah. We're gonna have some fun. We're doing more than just four a week. So who's coming out this month, well, we have got we've been waiting a long time for this John Ortberg and I did a deep dive into theology which is a lot of fun. Brad Lomenick, Clay Scroggins, and I are here. Joel and Nina Schmidgall have got a new book all about marriage. We're gonna talk about that. Kara Powell, and Steve Argue, Gary Chapman The Five Love Languages. I do a deep dive in the upcoming month or so with the team at Cross Point about what is changing in attractional church. You are not gonna want to miss that. Well, and there's a whole lot more. Kadi Cole, Ruth Haley Barton, Os Guinness, Sean Cannell, all you YouTubers, Tyler Reagin, Horst Schulze who is the founder of Ritz Carlton, we'll in talk. Blake Mycoskie from Toms Shoes, man we've got a lot coming up.

Carey Nieuwhof: So if you haven't subscribed do so. And oh yeah, back to next week. Here's a snippet from my conversation with John Ortberg.

John Ortberg: Well, it is a very interesting thing, he would write sometimes about that transition from life on Earth to the next life. And one of the pictures that he would use is somebody who is in a room and they move to the door into the next room and while they're there they can hear the conversation going on in the next room but they're still aware of that room they were in the process of

leaving. And that Jesus is coming for them and welcoming them and it is an interesting thing when Dallas died, a friend of mine named Gary Black was with him in the hospital and he said although the circumstances of Dallas's death were quite hard, that Dallas's final words were "Thank you. Thank you." And Gary said they were not directed towards him or anybody in the room. And so I'm not actually sure if those were Dallas's last words in this life or his first words in the next one.

Carey Nieuwhof: So that's next week on the podcast and hey before you go make sure that you've got a digital solution that fits your needs. Head on over to [ProMediafire.com/Carey](http://ProMediafire.com/Carey) get ten to forty percent off your media bundle custom graphics, sermon series artwork, all that stuff for your church done for you, hassle free. [Promediafire.com/Carey](http://Promediafire.com/Carey). Also come join me in Atlanta for Rethink Leadership. The deadline is next week so you don't want to miss it for the price going up. You can head on over to [RethinkLeadership.com](http://RethinkLeadership.com) and have a premier experience where you and your team of senior leaders can grow. That's [RethinkLeadership.com](http://RethinkLeadership.com). Hey guys I can't wait til next week thank you so much for listening and 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.