

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 359 of the podcast. My name is Carey Nieuwhof, and I hope our time together today has helped you lead like never before. Well I'm so glad to have Levi Lusko back on the podcast. I think this is his fourth appearance. He was on last month in a composite episode that... Well with his wife Jennie and with Albert Tate and Nicole Martin. He's back solo today.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We talk about the future church and all kinds of things. This, I thought, was one of the best conversations I've had this year about what the future church might look like. If you're interested in that stuff, and there's application for business too, you're going to love this episode. Today's episode is brought to you by Gloop. Speaking of the future church, if you want to learn more about your church's online audience so that you can better engage them, you would be shocked at what you could find by going to gloopinsights.com/carey, and by Pro Media Fire.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Our friends at Pro Media Fire will get you professional help for your digital media needs by going to promediafire.com/carey. You can get 10% off plans for life. It's a pretty transparent and really honest conversation with Levi and I. He is the Fresh Life Church founder, bestselling author. He comes back to the podcast to talk about... Well pretty transparently about dealing with adrenaline letdown after COVID hit, what the future church might look like, and why he's thinking church will become digital default. I would agree with him on that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

He is the founding and lead pastor of Fresh Life Church in Montana, Wyoming, Oregon, and Utah. You folks from Oregon tell me if I said that right. Because you're not Canadian, say Oregon. They say Oregon. That's how I always said it then I went to Oregon and they're like, no, it's like the musical instrument Oregon. I think I got that right. Anyway, if not, you will let me know. Levi is a bestselling author of *Through the Eyes of a Lion*, *Swipe Right*, *I Declare War*. He travels throughout the world speaking about Jesus. He and his wife, Jennie, have some wonderful kids. Man, it's just a joy to be with him again.

Carey Nieuwhof:

As you know, COVID-19 disrupted how people relate with one another and in many ways accelerated the churches need to engage with people online. But that complicates things because you're probably wondering, "Who the heck are these people? I have 318 people watching. I don't know who they are." Or you have 3,000 or 30,000 people watching and you're like, "I have no idea." There's a brand new thing I'm so excited about called Insights+. It's from our friends at Gloop. It removes the confusion and helps you bridge the digital gap and restore connection between you and your people.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You will actually be able to see who's viewing your website, know if they're members or visitors, see where they are locally or nationwide, and reengage them with next steps. Yep, that's all possible now. Gain clarity on your online audiences so you can take action and reach the right people with the right message online or in person. If you want to learn more go to glooinsights.com/carey. Then, our good friends at Pro Media Fire have been helping so many churches get through this digital divide that they face.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Because you went online and as much as you wish the Coronavirus was going away, you know online is going to be a part of your future. If you're a leader of a church between 500 and 5,000 members, here's what you're probably experiencing. Your digital church team is at a max. Your social media team can't keep up with the need for content. Your creative team is overwhelmed, and you're cautious about spending money with new staff to help, because who knows about this economy, right?

Carey Nieuwhof:

There's a solution, and Pro Media Fire will help. If you want to hire an entire creative team of professionals for less than the cost of a staff hire, you can do it. The best part is, the plans are month to month. You're not signing up for 15 years or forever. If you want to get your team help today with professional graphics, videos and content, and you want to help your church navigate the season of digital expansion, go to promediafire.com/carey, get 10% off plans for life. Even though you don't sign up for life, if you choose to use it for a long time, you'll get 10% off as long as you stay a customer. promediafire.com/carey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I love it that our partners are so generous with our podcast audience and you guys know, we only choose or select partners that we believe in. We have many people saying, "Hey, can I advertise?" The answer sometimes is, "No," because we want to go with the people we know, and your support to them means the world to us. I've got a What I'm Thinking About segment, I want to talk about your health. I found this whole interview fascinating, but particularly Levi's talk about just that the change inside him, and I want to talk about you, and why time off just doesn't work in terms of being able to restore your stress level, and your health and your emotional and spiritual health. We'll talk about that at the end of the show. In the meantime, my conversation with Levi Lusko. Levi, welcome back to the podcast. It's so great to have you.

Levi Lusko:

Carey, thanks for having me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I want to start, because I love asking leaders this question, not because I love what's happening but because I love to see how different people respond. I'd love to know how the crisis, here we are in month four, really rolling over to month four as we record this at a later date. How it's impacted you, your family, and how it's impacted Fresh Life Church.

Levi Lusko:

Wow, gosh. What's funny is I when we first started hearing glimmers of it, first it was on China, this Chinese things, Chinese virus and you're hearing about it. I remember seeing a clip of... I don't know if it

was manufactured or not, of drones going around China dumping out antiseptic on streets. What in the heck? It just seemed like it was-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Some Sci-Fi movie.

Levi Lusko:

It was like, What is this? What is even happening? Then it started becoming more and more and more. When it finally really started getting crazy, I was headed to Seattle. Then it was really starting to show up in Seattle in some of the retirement homes. I was literally flying there that weekend for a church commitment. I got some counsel from friends and they're like, "Look, I don't recommend you bail on a church that's booked you and promoted you coming, but at least call the senior pastor and see if he'd be willing to... I understand if you are wanting to postpone my coming."

Levi Lusko:

I did that. I called him said, "Hey, I would understand if you wanted to have me later." He's like, "No we're moving forward with the service." So like, okay so let your yes be yes. So I got on the plane and it was a really an unsettled feeling on the plane flying to the mouth of the beast, Seattle. Spoke, woke up the next morning, Seattle has prohibited any gatherings over 250 overnight. I was the last person to preach... Still I'm the last person to preach to that church. They haven't re-opened yet.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Levi Lusko:

Then I flew that Wednesday to Chicago. I had to speak in Chicago that Wednesday. Same exact thing happened except this time, while I was speaking, the mayor during my message, said no gatherings over 50 or whatever it was. I'm still the last person to have preached in that church.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Levi Lusko:

Then I came home and Montana still hadn't shut down because we're late to the game. We're socially distanced by way of life. I preached at our church that Sunday, and I'm the last person to preach at my church. In that season, I was just zipping under the wire in all three instances.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Levi Lusko shut down America. Now we know how that happened.

Levi Lusko:

I was just going to say it. I know I may have been single handedly the responsible party for spreading the coronavirus around the country, but I will say this, I haven't been on a plane since that flight home from Chicago. That was back in March. It's the longest gap in 15 years with no air travel which is so strange.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What is that like? Because I'm the same way. I flew back from Atlanta March 10th. The next day the dominoes all started falling and that was it. That was my last flight. I was-

Levi Lusko:

Have you traveled since? No?

Carey Nieuwhof:

No.

Levi Lusko:

It's been a weird thing. I'll see my suitcase, come across it in the spare bedroom closet and be like what in the world? What is happening? But at the same time, it has been... I've been playing so much more tennis. I've been biking a lot. I've been so much more... Doing things that you're hard pressed to deal with when you're always going going going. I'll take care though. It's been also a weird thing because I have also had to deal with an incredible amount of adrenaline in my system that normally I would be using.

Levi Lusko:

There's an adrenaline rush to an airplane takeoff and landing. There is excitement, going into an engagement, speaking to a crowd, going into a hotel room. There's dopamine and all that. I felt like I was in sort of an adrenaline withdrawal. I found it in my system needing to go somewhere.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What did you do with that?

Levi Lusko:

I had more counseling appointments than normal. I legitimately did. I mean, I'm not joking. I booked multiple times. I just needed to process it because I found myself... I didn't love what came out. I didn't love what came out in my own heart, my spirit in the way I was handling that stress. I made it a rule. For 30 days, I took a walk every day regardless of the weather. There was one day where it was sub zero and blowing wind. I took my son, my two and a half year old son so my wife could have a break.

Levi Lusko:

He's three now. Now that this is airing in August. I put a windshield over the stroller, with this plexi windshield thing go over the stroller. I went out, and I found that the long walks with no cell phone were incredibly restorative to me. I journaled more. I think this has exposed idols that I didn't even realize were idols inside.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I was going to say, what is underneath that? If you don't mind going there because yeah, we're all learning stuff about ourselves.

Levi Lusko:

I think there's a lot of narcissism obviously in all of our hearts. I think for me too, it's just... I like the intensity and I like the war mode. I thrive on that. The exhilaration and rush of that next thing. I think to some degree, there's been an amount of, "He makes me to lie down in green pastures," that I've been having to walk through.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. It must be strange for you because the rush of Sunday has changed too, right? Gathering. I mean, you're still preaching, you're still communicating but you don't have the rush of Sunday. Either the pressure of Sunday or the rush of Sunday. Has that impacted you in some ways?

Levi Lusko:

That didn't go anywhere, because for me that pressure of writing that sermon, that intensity, it builds up. My joke is, as a preacher you have a baby on Sunday, you have to get pregnant on Monday and no one wants to get pregnant the day after they had a baby. But that's how Mondays feel sometimes. I mean, you're having to recreate again life in this essence in your womb of a message, of something you're wanting to deliver. They literally call the sermon delivery.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You just gave birth yesterday. Yeah, that's a great analogy.

Levi Lusko:

I don't want to get pregnant but that's what studying is for me on Monday. I still have found the intensity of that blinking red light, the tagline on the camera and the YouTube comments. I found that to be still very meaningful and very exciting. I've definitely had to pivot. We started capturing messages. We had one advantage in the whole thing. That was that when we planted Fresh Life, I was in series getting invitations to speak. I talked to one of our board members about it and he actually said, "Why do you want to do guest speaker so often? It interrupts the flow of a series." He goes, "Why don't you just go in the building when it's empty and record the sermon. Then when you're gone, you could just play that video."

Levi Lusko:

This was before we were multi site. This was before I knew of anybody else doing it. I'm sure Craig Groeschel or Andy Stanley or somebody was doing it, but this would have been early in 2009. I was like, "That's an interesting idea. Maybe it'll work." I went into the theater. It was nine o'clock at night, had the video guy and sound guy there. I just preached my message, explained to the church what I was doing. I said, "Hey, I got asked to do this thing. So I'm recording this message on a Thursday night at nine. You're listening to it on a Sunday." But I said, "But it's based on God's word which was written 2000 years ago. So let's see how this works." People got saved, some people didn't like it, some people did. It really taught us, "Oh, we could use this tool of video in a unique way." I've been doing it for a long time. That to me was old hat.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How's this been for your family to have you home that much? What are you learning about that?

Levi Lusko:

I think my wife would say I've been home a little too much. We were joking that... We had to find new rhythm because absence makes the heart grow fonder and we had relied on that. I think it caused us to... You can get a little bit... You know when you were a kid and you would do a sleepover at your friend's house and then he'd sleep at yours and the third time you would be in a fistfight?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Uh-huh(affirmative).

Levi Lusko:

There can be to some extent that in a marriage because Jennie and I we work together, we live together. I think we had to find a way through it that wasn't... I'm not leaving and neither is she.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Then were your kids in school or were they homeschooled, or how did that work?

Levi Lusko:

A combination. My oldest daughter is in school. She is starting as a freshman next year, and she's going out for the tennis team, really excited. But she was heartbroken. She is an extrovert, needs people, craves people, and it was driving her crazy to be home. Then my two daughters are homeschooled, and life didn't change very much for them.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I've talked to so many parents, and our kids are in their 20s now, but so many parents whose kids, particularly daughters, are just hating it because they miss their friends. They love their parents and being home, but they really, really miss their friends. Anything else about just the personal disruption that this has wrought? Anything that you are learning, anything that you would say, "This is something I'm really paying attention to right now?"

Levi Lusko:

The biggest thing I'm learning Carey right now is that power of deactivating your normal tendencies. Like I said, I love that war drum. I love that beat of... I've really been learning a lot lately about how to turn that off. My counselor made a reference to me. She said it as a joke but I took it as, "Oh, gosh, that's a real assignment. I'll have to really pray to do." She said, "You should make waffles, do not follow the mix in the back of the box." Not follow the rules.

Levi Lusko:

Because to me that's... It's easy to approach even a vacation or a family day with military precision and forethought and planning and intentionality because that's just how I thrive. And she's like, "The next time you make waffles, not follow the recipe. Just let the kids throw what they want to throw in there." It's like, that to me is I'm learning the power of that. Even just like yesterday, just sitting in the moment, not thinking about what time it is, not thinking about the day ahead of me, not thinking about things I want to get done, or not even reveling in the productivity of the day's work.

Levi Lusko:

Because how I'm wired, I can't really feel good about myself without a sense of accomplishment, but that's not healthy. When your self image is attached to your productivity, because to me, productivity might as well be called heroin. I feel like, if I got some stuff done, I feel good about myself and if I didn't, I don't. Learning to expose that as idolatry and lean into my identity as a son of the King and then from there, let that work flow out is a healthy thing for me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You sound like a planner, you sound like an organizer. You sound like you had everything mapped out. You're busy all the time and you were just moving from this to that, to this to that. Is that fair characterization?

Levi Lusko:

Yeah, it's very hard for me to not see off into the future the next thing. The tour, we had a 13 city bus tour that got rescheduled. The speaking engagements, the vacation, all those things. That's that's how I am and unhealthy. When I'm unhealthy, those things I build them up in my mind especially the day off, the trip away. That's definitely... What you said is fair to say.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's interesting because I've spent some time with Henry Cloud. He's going to be on the show this summer, has been on the show depending on when everything airs. He was just talking about the huge change of pace for all of us. One of the things he talked about and this is something I learned after I burned out because I could not sit still in my 30s, and then God made me sit still. I'm like, "Okay, that's what burnout does, right?" Learning the contemplate of life. He mentioned Tony Blair who, when he was Prime Minister of England, would find a pond and sit there for half a day.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Warren Buffett's made it a discipline for seven, eight decades to stare out of the window for an hour and a half every day. It sounds like you're doing a little bit more of that. Some contemplative, some quiet stuff. Anything you can share from what you're learning in those moments?

Levi Lusko:

Yes. I would echo everything you're saying. I've never stared out of a window in my entire life. That is incredibly challenging, but I think I learned if I don't take those walks without my phone, even just little tiny tweaks. When I wake up, I go downstairs every morning and I light a fire and I make a pot of coffee and I have my journal, my book, my Bible, my devotional. Then after that I have whatever two books that I'm reading. Right now it's a book on Roosevelt. A book that my staff and I are going to be going through this summer. We're doing a Zoom every week. We normally would have a big advance where everyone comes in, but instead we're doing a book club where we're going to read through and talk through a book every week together as a team.

Levi Lusko:

I'm working through that. If I leave my phone upstairs in the room where it woke me up as an alarm and don't touch it until after that hour of time with the Holy Spirit, and then an hour of reading and then I go upstairs, get it and I put a podcast on when I make my breakfast. That to me is an incredibly... That is all the difference in the day going with me at my best and my worst. I've not touched Instagram, I've not been on email, I've not read a text message.

Levi Lusko:

The only time I violate it, I always regret it. For example, I preached on racism this last Sunday. Obviously at this moment we're going through so much with protesting and riots and it's all that, the conversation on race. I gave a message, talked about what in my mind what white privilege is and how I found it in the Bible in Esther. Esther has position, you have privilege. Esther is not bad that you have it. I think a lot of people are very defensive about privilege, like, "Oh, I don't have it." As though someone is trying to take it away from me?

Levi Lusko:

Mordecai wasn't trying to take away Esther's privilege, she was trying to tell her to leverage it for the other people in her life who didn't have it. I gave a sermon to our church and I just said, "Hey look, I view myself as a Caucasian white pastor, someone with privilege, but that's not bad. That means I need to use that privilege for the oppressed and those who don't have that." The next morning, I violated my own rule. I grabbed my phone and while I was getting my coffee ready, I flipped open to my emails. Little nagging voice said, "What are you doing?" But it's like those things we ignore to our detriment.

Levi Lusko:

First email, a guy in our church who has been a part of our church for a long time, "I'm disappointed in you" is the subject. Then he went on to tell me why he's leaving the church over this particular message. It's so funny how that, of course, was the thing that brought me into that tailspin emotionally. I find if I'm able to let God's voice be the first voice I listen to, I'm just a better version of myself for the day.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Thanks for sharing so deeply and so personally. I think you're reading a lot of people's mail right now. I just appreciate the fact because so often, Levi, in stories it's like, "Well I had this tough season, but that was years ago. Now I'm great." I just think it's great to be able to go together with you in real time through this. Thank you for sharing that.

Levi Lusko:

Sure.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'd love to know if... Go ahead.

Levi Lusko:

Well, no, I think I relate to other people who are honest about the dysfunction, not to glorify that. I think it can be the other side of it where it's too much of a big deal.

Carey Nieuwhof:

"Look at what a mess I am."

Levi Lusko:

Yeah or even like, I don't know. If you aren't struggling, you're not somehow good. There are seasons where we're great. I think to be real about that too is important. Times of blessing, times of... There's times when you just feel wonderful and you're doing good. I think we should be able to celebrate that

too. Mountaintops and valleys to the extent that we're willing to be real about the hardships we're facing, people will relate to us more.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Love to switch gears a little bit and talk to you about that moment when you realized you couldn't meet at your church and your locations, and you have many locations. You're in four states. What was your first reaction when you knew you weren't going to be able to meet physically at your locations?

Levi Lusko:

I went through a range, a spectrum, I went through, "The hell we aren't!" My mind flashed to the book of Acts. Whether it's right to listen to you or not, I don't know. I was there and then I was, hold on a second, what kind of a witness would that be? I went through a lot of different things. I was in an airport of course when I first was told this might be coming. I was in the Denver Airport. And it was Portland. Our church in Portland was the first to be told they couldn't meet. Then they all quickly followed suit.

Levi Lusko:

When that first came, I was like, "This can't be real. This is so surreal." But then I was like... I almost felt like a great sense of, "Well, we've been in training for this but didn't know it. Thank God for what we have." I guess then I quickly went, "What about the church that..." I thought about church plants right away too. We made it a priority within the first two Sundays to find a church plant that maybe didn't have infrastructure systems, was portable, and we covered a couple months of their expenses so that they could use whatever money they needed to to buy some video cameras or whatever. I guess I was all over the place.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. So you were all over the place. You're right. I mean, you were probably positioned. You had a strong church, a large ministry, a budget. Probably a little bit of money in the bank and that kind of thing. What has the impact to date, because as we're recording this, you're still not open in your physical locations? Do you have the option to be open and you just chose not to be or how is that working? I know it's complicated with four states and multiple jurisdictions.

Levi Lusko:

Sure, well, every state's different. We don't think there will be any gatherings in Oregon anytime this summer. It looks like it'll be fall before there's anything that we're able to do. In Jackson Hole, Wyoming, they are, because there's such a small sheltered community taking it very seriously. There's been more restrictions in Jackson than even in the greater state of Wyoming. Montana is at the time of recording this in phase two. We could have church with social distancing, we could have church with a limited percentage of people in the building. All those masks and six foot distance and even ushering people to their seats.

Levi Lusko:

Otherwise the risk of course is that someone would get it, and you'd get a lawsuit and be liable because you didn't respond to that CDC recommendations. At this point, we've just said we're not going to do it until there's not restrictions. I'm comfortable with us staying. Right now we're doing watch parties in Montana. Up to 50 people can be in a space. People are liking that. We call it church online together. If

you want to watch church with 49 other people, I don't preach it live but it's still video but you're doing it with other human beings.

Levi Lusko:

I don't think there's an urgency to get back. I think what I told our church was, "Business is rushing and scrambling to get open. Why? Because business is broken. That gym is going to go out of business for good if they don't get open so they have to. The church can't be broken. We can serve our city by being reluctant to rush in and let people's visits out be either to go buy a car or go to a spa or whatever and spend some money. Business is going to potentially go under without that. We can continue to meet online and thrive and be the church we were born to be."

Carey Nieuwhof:

What reaction has or I guess results have you seen online? Because you had metrics before. You had church online before. You would podcast your messages, et cetera. Have you seen a spike? Was it flat? Just tell us a little bit in the narrative.

Levi Lusko:

Well, we're definitely impacting more people online than we were before this. More people are watching online than would have been in a physical location. That being said, I think the reality is what the first week and the second week numbers were, have been gradually declining all throughout this pandemic. That is everybody I talk to with a few exceptions. There's a few Elevation and Transformation Church that are just on a different level. They're like the Joe Rogan podcast practically. They're just ridiculous.

Levi Lusko:

But we have seen engagement wane. Now that normally happens every summer for us anyway, as the weather gets bright and warm, fewer people watch and fewer people are in seats than would be normally because they're out kayaking or whatever. But at the same time, I do see that the novelty and the... At first this is a shiny new object. It has been settled.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Has it settled to the level where it's lower than it would have been say a year ago in the summer, or are you just thinking it's normal seasonal attrition, do you have any theories on that?

Levi Lusko:

Well, we're way above what year over year would be, but not-

Carey Nieuwhof:

There you go.

Levi Lusko:

... but not pre COVID first couple weeks is what I'm saying.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. You're already up year over year. You're probably up to over where you were pre COVID. But it's just not quite the heights that you had in those first few weeks. But I think that's what crisis does. I'm sure the news ratings aren't what they were in that first week of global shutdown either.

Levi Lusko:

Sure. The churches after 9/11, all those analogies of everyone's spirituality becoming a fever pitch and then eventually just settling back down to normal.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'm glad we're having this conversation before you're exercising the option to reopen because I would love to capture this moment in time to think about what your factors or criteria will be when you decide to reopen. You hinted at it earlier, but could you drill down on that a little bit? What will need to be true for you to say, "Great church is back on in person?"

Levi Lusko:

Well, I mean, I consider what we're doing now with our 50 person watch parties. They're all over the state of Montana. I consider that to be open. If you're with 49 people, and you're watching church, you're worshipping. I feel like that is powerful. I think that to me gives us a toe in the waters comfort level but for whatever reason, I just felt like I don't want to see church with restrictions.

Levi Lusko:

I don't want to see our gatherings with masks. Maybe my song will change. If this drags on for eight months, maybe we will have to develop that as a society. I guess I just would rather have, when people return to our theaters and our actual gatherings, that they are not going to involve memories of caution tape over rows. I made the decision when I went to Qdoba. When Qdoba finally opened and I walked in, they had the crime scene tape over every other table.

Levi Lusko:

I just looked around and thought, "I don't like this. I don't want to be in here. I'll take my food to go eat it at home or eat in on a bench on a park." I'm sitting at a table, but the table next to me it's got a yellow caution tape over it. I just was like, "I don't want that to be a taste people have in their mouth while they're worshipping."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Isn't that interesting? I don't want to read too much into this but you and I talked about flying. I've talked to a lot of my friends about flying. I've got people who definitely want me to jump on a plane. I can't right now because our borders still locked down. But I have the same thought process in my mind when it comes to airplanes. I'm top tier status at Air Canada. But I'm like, "I don't want to get on if every other seat is empty and if everyone has to wear masks, and if my water is handed to me in a bottle, and my food is in a box. You have to get a temperature scan before you get on," which I understand may be here to stay.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But there's something in my psychology that says, "I'd rather stay home than fly under those conditions." I don't know what that is. That might be three counseling appointments away from figuring out what that is. But I think you're articulating something-

Levi Lusko:

That's really funny.

Carey Nieuwhof:

... that is somehow in the ether because even churches that are reopening, at least in these early days are discovering that their numbers are shockingly low when they reopen. This imagined rush back to church in the auditorium. Any thoughts on a drill down on that, that people want, like church as they knew it as opposed to these abysmally low numbers that we're seeing in these early days of reopening?

Levi Lusko:

Yeah, I don't know. I think... What would I want? Would I want to come in with a mask on and be told, "You may now go into the bathroom because there are half as many people as there are sinks in there." I feel like I would almost rather... The experience online with your kids watching a kid's YouTube video after the regular worship service and then inviting friends over. Part of it too is I think I don't want to fight a battle I can't win. If I open up a service that I don't know if there's a level of mystery, I would just rather have it be...

Carey Nieuwhof:

I hear you.

Levi Lusko:

I don't know. I just feel like it's in my gut. How do you feel about it?

Carey Nieuwhof:

I tend to agree. I've seen some of the pictures online of super socially distanced worship. Listen, there are leaders I respect who are reopening at the first opportunity. I'm not saying this is black and white or right and wrong at all. But I am saying... I'm with you on that one. It's like not wanting to fly until at least it's not as weird as it appears to be right now. This is someone who's flown.

Levi Lusko:

Of course no matter what decision you make, you take shots from both sides. It's interesting of course to see 10,000 people in a protest but it's like no we can't get 500 people in a room for church.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think too you have the luxury and we would have that luxury too of, "The sky is not falling." I assume your givings are decent. You've got more people than you've ever had before. They're connecting. What are some things... Let's start here. How have you changed your services, or have you changed them at all, with the reality of online only and then these watch parties which are physically distanced gatherings of 50 people or less?

Levi Lusko:

No, those aren't physically distanced. 50 can be... That's why we started doing them. In Montana right now, 50 people with no socially distanced. You don't have to wear a masks. You don't have to keep six feet away. They're hugging, they're knuckle bumping, we have sanitizer out and stuff like that but if it's 50, there's no rules on.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh great. Okay. Good to know. But have you made changes in your service format?

Levi Lusko:

Not really. I mean, we developed a more robust pre-show, so that people who jump on earlier were able to pull in viewers into the Skypes or check in with small groups. That's been really fun. That's been more robust. Then I've done the giving more often. I don't normally lead the giving but I feel like a connection from my wife and I to those who are partnering with us in the ministry. I feel like maybe that's been with a little more intentionality. That might be out of fear which, founded or not, is a real thing. The need to... Get me in front of the givers, let me make sure I'm sharing my heart with them.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I get that instinct.

Levi Lusko:

Those instincts aren't always right though. It's funny you think. So now we've used that up even. I did the offering for several weeks in a row but now we're utilizing our other pastors on staff and other team members to do that more often. Although it's funny but they'll come to me like, "Hey, we think you should do the giving this weekend." Even that I'm like, that's because I probably put that in place. They saw that knee jerk reaction to do it in critical moments. Then that's even how they're coming to me with. Having to retrain some of those things that I've allowed and casting vision.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's cool. What are your staff doing these days? What have you got them redeployed to doing?

Levi Lusko:

Well, our central staff hasn't skipped a beat. As a church with local staffs in the churches and then a central team, I think so much fell on the central team right away. Especially the audio, video, creative. Those roles became more important than ever. They're defying. We didn't ever have to defy because we're allowed to send the broadcasting team in and stuff like that. But the real dilemma was to try and stop ourselves from unnecessarily creating busy work for the local staffs.

Levi Lusko:

We almost even just were like, "Hey look, we'd rather you be more rested when life does pick back up than rearrange these Bibles and then tear them out and rearrange them again." Almost like, "We need you to feel busy." It would almost be better for them to lean into a restful season somewhat than to be frenetically just doing something out of a twitchy need to just be busy.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's good. I haven't heard that answer. That's a really refreshing response. What about online engagement? As you've attracted more and more people, how have you tracked with them? Have you gotten to know anybody? What are you doing to encourage engagement over just say viewing or casual observing?

Levi Lusko:

Well, in response to your comment, I bet you haven't heard that before. That came the hard way. We were talking to a couple that we bumped into. I don't know how my wife and I did. They said, "Man, our campus pastor checked in with us nine times last week." I think-

Carey Nieuwhof:

"Leave me alone!"

Levi Lusko:

They were almost saying, "We're good. We're okay."

Carey Nieuwhof:

"Nothing's changed."

Levi Lusko:

Yeah. I told that story on a staff meeting jokingly and just said something like, "Yes, we want to be checking in with the people but at the same time, I don't want you to feel pressure that if you're not always doing something, your job's on the line." You know what I mean. It's not like... That's not how we're thinking. When a football team has had an athlete on the bench for a while, they're still part of the team. They'll come back in eventually.

Levi Lusko:

They're chat hosting and doing that sort of thing. They were coming up with ideas and different things like that. But in my mind, it wasn't like... I wanted them to know in my mind it was like out of sight out of mind, or because your role right now isn't one that is even not necessary, but the kicker's not wasting space on the bench just because he's not kicking. You get called in eventually. I wanted everyone to have that breath of exhale. But in response to your second question, we shifted our church assimilation class to... We wanted to. We talked forever about an online version of it but this was, "Okay, let's scramble."

Levi Lusko:

We created an online module where you could go through our church membership and all of that and begin serving. That's something we wanted to do forever but we had the impetus to really figure it out now. That's been amazing to be able to put people through it and even figure out what it looks like to be a part of it when you don't live anywhere near geographically where our church is at. We'll have someone go through it in Pennsylvania, and now they start serving and they're an online host serving. Given they're a part of our church, they've signed the charter. Whatever our document is, the code of conduct. They're part of our church now, but they don't live anywhere near where we do.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's amazing. One of my theories is that there's what I call market consolidation or economists call markets and consolidation happening. Where again, you're church based in the mid west or the west coast is now... Now got people who actively affiliate but they're in Pennsylvania. Any sense that that may be what's happening to some of your online audience? It's non geographic specific and that there's consolidation where churches or Christians are moving allegiances to new congregations, new pastors, any thoughts on that?

Levi Lusko:

Yeah, I have a lot of mixed thoughts, Carey. This is what wakes me up at two in the morning. I have a fear of it a lot. I think that's probably why we didn't do it for years because of just the risk of celebrating transfer growth and patting ourselves on the back because someone... To local expression of the body of Christ to watch our online broadcast and maybe they're not going to get the level of discipleship and having authority in their lives that they would need to really become a meaningful part of the body of Christ.

Levi Lusko:

I'm concerned about someone who is maybe just wanting to buck authority, or maybe they were in a situation where they were unkind to their spouse or whatever and the pastor maybe said something. Now it's like, "We're not going to church anymore." Instead they watch First Life online. I think about these things and I'm concerned about them. But what I have seen in... I guess I can't let fear keep me from moving forward in faith.

Levi Lusko:

I have the faith of if someone is apart and is serving, I can't keep that from happening even in our churches. There are some people even in physical churches who are unwilling to yield to authority. I have a lot of conflicted emotions when I think about the bigger picture. I was talking about this in January. I gave a talk at Passion 2020. I talked about part of my concern of church online is to be shallowly going to lots of churches, but you can change the channel anytime the preacher says something that steps on your toes.

Levi Lusko:

What that Pandora's box is going to look like down the road, I compared it to the Dust Bowl that swept through the country. Then this now is like that on an entirely different level. But of course, there was always that risk. There is also the opportunity for there to be genuine life change. Genuine... Your heart resonates with the ministry's heartbeat, and you get to be a meaningful part of it regardless of where in the country or world you live.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think that's the tension we're in right now. That's a great articulation of it, Levi. I know lots of people because I read the comments on my platform and other platforms all the time who would say, "That's exactly the problem with what you're doing." You're online, you're consolidating all these people who you're right, can change the channel the moment you say something that they don't like. On the one hand, they're right. On the other hand, it's happening. What do you do? You're not going to stop the internet. You're not going to stop church online, and you're not going to stop the future from getting here. In some ways, I think our theology and our ecclesiology has to catch up with what's actually happening. I think that's a really good articulation of it.

Levi Lusko:

Well, what gave me peace to move forward with declaring someone who's online attending a part of our church was that parable about the angels job of separating the sheep from the goats at the end of the age. That if we try and do it now, you'll rip up with the weeds. That's God's job. It's so funny that I have to learn this lesson so often. But an incredible sense of peace comes from the remembering that God is God, and we're not. Anytime I'm trying to control something or I don't... I can't mitigate the risk, therefore I'm leery to move forward. God's like, "Hey, tap, tap, tap. Remember this thing called sovereignty?" The moment I begin to need to control. I'm ignoring him and so that's given me great peace.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I would love you, you mentioned volunteering a couple times. I sign on with Fresh Life Church, and I commit to volunteering. Right now you only have digital options and watch parties. What does that look like? In a digital church. I become a permanent digital attender of Fresh Life Church from Pennsylvania, from Toronto, wherever. What does volunteering look like in that reality?

Levi Lusko:

Well, one of the biggest things that we care about is the revitalization of the city that you live in. In Nehemiah, every worker was called to work at the part of the wall that was in front of his own house. We place a great emphasis on the idea of serving within your community. For example, next week, we're mailing out shirts. Every year we send a new shirt out. That's a shirt you wear when you're doing community service. We have this old fashioned crazy belief that community service is not punishment, but it's actually a privilege. It's an honor.

Levi Lusko:

I know judges can assign it like, "Oh, you've been bad you have to do community service." But it's like, "No, hold on a second. The church should be at the front of serving communities." The book of Jeremiah says, "In the piece of the city that you live in, you will have peace." It started for us in 2010. I went to the mayor, we were two churches then. I went to the mayor of the city that we broadcast from and just said, "We have several thousand people attending this church, how can we help? What's in your heart? What don't you have budget for that you want to do?"

Levi Lusko:

She gave us some things, and we picked those off that summer. We were like, "Oh, we could do this more." Then we started giving out outreach grants, and we quickly grew and scaled. Now we've given out millions of dollars and thousands upon thousands upon thousands of man hours. If you serve in Philadelphia, not only are you able to be an online greeter and be in Zoom small groups through the week, but we are going to give you the tools and the challenge to get out to the parks and rec department, to do blood drives, to actually be serving as the church in the city, so that the place that we live in might become a more beautiful and a healthy place.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I love that vision. You know what, in the same way that multi site scales to different cities in different states like you and many other pastors have, theoretically, what's the difference between Portland and Philadelphia? Just a couple thousand miles. That's all. Right? That's about it.

Levi Lusko:

Yeah, I mean, it's hard to think about, but right now the paradigm is changing. We were one church in 13 locations. Now, at this moment, we are one church in 3,000. I don't even know how many locations we would be in across the continental United States and then around the world. But the same things apply, and it's caused us to go, "Okay this ongoing sanctification, this growth and maturing and even challenging in people's lives as needed, it can work on the internet when it had to. Can it continue to work when it doesn't have to?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

Love to run this hypothetical by you. Let's just say it's not happening anytime soon, but the virus is cured. Everything goes back to normal to the point where we can gather as many people as we want. Air traffic's normal. People are back at restaurants. The whole deal, the fear of the virus is gone. You just reopen Fresh Life Church across all locations, what will be different moving forward? Do you think that this has permanently changed the way you see or approach ministry? Is there anything you will do differently than you were doing pre COVID?

Levi Lusko:

I would think we will never approach things the same way again. Honestly I think out of the scope and scale of all that we're doing, I think that the in person gatherings, in our minds, will be somewhat like the traditional service that many churches used to offer. "This is our services and for those who like the old school, we have a traditional service." Now I'm not belittling our 13 churches that have worship experiences in buildings and all of that, but I very much see it as that is going to be a component of a much larger vision.

Levi Lusko:

I feel like God is opening our eyes to see the blue ocean of opportunity. Of seeing regardless of where you live, you can be a part of it, you can be resourced, you can be equipped and you can be sent. That happening on such a grand scale that the 13 locations we had going into this with a... "Oh yeah, we have a church online also," is almost now like, "We have a church online and we have some physical brick and mortar locations." I definitely feel like it's caused me to look at everything in a completely backwards fashion.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I couldn't agree more, and I think that's a wonderful articulation because I've talked a lot about church online and I get beat up. It's like, "Well, the church is going to gather, gather, gather." But to me, it almost feels, and I've used this analogy, Connexus Church with some of our leaders. It feels to me like if you've ever been to a taping of The Tonight Show or something like that. That's something that millions of people watch, but there's only 400 people in the audience. I almost wonder if that's what the church of the future will be like. That there's a studio audience or studio congregation so to speak, that's gathered but most of the people will be intermittently attending physical gatherings, and a lot will just simply be online. Any other thoughts on that that might help inform how you're seeing the future?

Levi Lusko:

Yeah, I think so. I think that's an interesting way to look at. I guess The Tonight Show, people are consuming. Where so long as, us leaders, our perspective is the equipping. That's always been our job. The equipping of the saints to do the ministry.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's a major difference.

Levi Lusko:

But the scale of it is what you're talking about. I think that's where we need to be thinking of.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, I'm talking about 400 people in the room and a million people watching or whatever that would be. As opposed to we're thinking, like you said, "Everybody has to be in the room," and then there's a few people watching. Which actually wasn't true pre COVID. I'm sure your online audience was already bigger than your in person audience pre COVID, was it?

Levi Lusko:

Yeah. For sure. To a multiple when you add in... I mean, you'd have 30,000 people listen in a week just on Spotify pre COVID. When you have... There's hardly that many people in the state of Montana. You know what I'm saying? Joking. I definitely thought of our online ministry as an important but auxiliary component of what we were doing. Whereas now I see it as being the thing we are doing and the physical gathering a component of it. I think God has been more and more bringing me to that place.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, I think that's great. It's almost like the church has become a digital default church. That that is now our starting point. Do you think that'll impact your staffing long term? How you staff the church?

Levi Lusko:

No doubt. I never want to make any absolute thing but I do see... I wonder if we will continue opening brick and mortar locations. That is... I'm trying to envision when we could have 30 watch parties in a city, why we would want to go in and build another one. I just don't know. Maybe it'll all... In two years now we'll be like, oh, can you believe we ever thought that? But at this point right now, just the scalability, the flexibility. The way that in a group size of 30, or 100 or whatever people, people really can know each other, to a large degree, be even held accountable better than in a 2000 person environment.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It is really interesting when you think about it because it'd be tempting to look at the watch parties as a band aid strategy until you can get to a building again. But what if that became a permanent expression of just the way that people were gathering? Fascinating.

Levi Lusko:

Yeah, I mean, isn't the largest church on earth structured that way? Isn't that Korean church, the million person church, isn't it more... They only come together for very special occasions in large groups and for the rest of the time they're in these house churches. I mean, it's exciting to think about what that would look like. When you add in the digital component. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It scales, and you don't have nearly the cost associated with it because you look at... I think your contacts because when you've been on the show before, and we've connected, we talked about that.

You don't have multi thousand seat places. You're going into small towns, smaller communities, smaller venues, but it still cost you hundreds of thousands or sometimes millions of dollars to open up a location. Whereas, you could put \$100,000 into a few watch parties and well, I don't even know what you do with that kind of money and a few watch parties. You know what I'm saying? It just scales at a much bigger level if you could start to think about the paradigm differently.

Levi Lusko:

No doubt. I mean, you're talking about criminal background checks. You're talking about muffins at the end of the day. What your really cost is and then staff to resource and equip and be shepherding. You'd have cluster pastors. I think it's very exciting. Then that global vision rolls out on a much bigger scale potentially than had you been thinking only in terms of what you could do in a city. I don't think it'll ever replace that. I think whether it's coming together monthly or whatever, I still think there's something very special that the Holy Spirit blesses about gatherings. But I do think that it changes... The limiting factors maybe have been removed.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Anything else about the future church, Levi, that you're thinking about? Knowing that all of our thinking's in pencil. It's very wet cement right now, but anything else you're thinking about the future church or the future of your church?

Levi Lusko:

I wonder what this is going to do. I mean, we've been seeing such a migration towards cities, people leaving rural, people leaving small town to get to cities. I just wonder. Right now, we found out what happens when you live 30 bodies deep, stacked 100 stories tall in a building. I wonder if we're not going to see... I know we're for sure seeing in Montana an incredible... I was having a socially distant dinner with some people. I sat next to a realtor and I was like, "Has this been a good break for you?" He goes, "Big break, it's been the busiest I've ever worked in my entire life."

Levi Lusko:

I go, "What do you mean? People buying new homes? It's economically not seemingly to be a time when people are wanting to do it." He goes, "Atlanta, Dallas, LA." He rattled off. He goes, "That was today I showed houses to people." There's a lot of people I think wanting to move to Colorado. I think the appeal of Middle America is definitely going to be post COVID something that people are going to be thinking about. Now that you can work remotely, why not?

Carey Nieuwhof:

I've talked to a number of CEOs who have basically left the major cities and they and their teams are now in some rural community that barely has internet and they're like, "Actually, this works." They're shocked. I wonder if that's really going to change the game for a lot of urban churches but also for the rural ones. We live... I say Toronto because no one knows where we live, but we live in the middle of nowhere. You already saw a little bit of a flight out of the city. But if the commutes gone, and the internet's good, you may have solved a major problem.

Levi Lusko:

Yeah, and I think we've always... Fresh Life has defied somewhat those statistics on the idea of a large church springing up in a very small city. On our biggest Sunday we ever had, we had one out of 20 people in the city, in church in person. That's incredible.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It is.

Levi Lusko:

To think now it's a completely different playing field when we can reach and weaponize for the kingdom, people regardless of where they live, big city or rural cities. It's very exciting.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You got a brand new podcast with your wife Jennie called Hey, It's The Lusko's. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that, and why you started it, and what it's about? I'm just fascinated.

Levi Lusko:

Well, Jennie and I always have had in the back of our minds the idea of just a complete freeform podcast. We don't really have a script. We just completely just talk what we're going through, what we're learning, what we're seeing. We may pull in some content here and there that we hope would be at some point in the podcast, something we bring up. Sometimes we get to the end of it, we never do. It's been really fun just to talk marriage and hopefully let people in who have listened to us speak or read books we've written. But to hear it on a more conversational, just here's what we're going through kind of a level.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, that's neat. That's neat. You've got a new resource coming out this summer too that I'd love for you to talk to leaders about in August. Sort of a book, sort of a journal, sort of a study. Can you tell us about it, Levi?

Levi Lusko:

Yes. When I wrote my first book, *Through the Eyes of a Lion*, it was all about grief. Then my third book was all about emotional intelligence and self-management. Long story short, I had taken a test that would supposedly tell you your level of emotional intelligence, and I didn't do nearly as well as I thought I would. I was crestfallen. That led me to a several year journey to improve because it said, "If you take six months, you can take the test again and see how you do."

Levi Lusko:

I worked hard on some of the things that I was... my points that were low in. By the end of it, I brought my score up dramatically. That particular study that motivated me, the statistic is 57% of success in any endeavor comes down to emotional intelligence. I thought, "Gosh, if I'm this weak, how much better could I be doing by showing up this blind spot?" That led to that two year long journey where I was working on the book while working on myself and then eventually all that I learned, I put into the book. Emotional intelligence and grief.

Levi Lusko:

My publisher approached me and said, "We feel like those two messages really could lead to something that people who are going through hard things but also wanting to better themselves. It could be a way to take those messages deeper." We came up with this book. It's called Take Back Your Life. It's a 40-day interactive journey to thinking right so you can live right. What it does is it takes you through content that is among the most salient truths expressed in the books, but then also questions take it further, prayers to pray. There's space for meditation. There's a section called Breathe, Think and Live just because of how powerful it is to slow down and breathe, then think and then act. It's hardcover. I've never been published in hardcover. It has a ribbon. I love books with ribbons because then you save your place from yesterday.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Ribbon, that's really cool.

Levi Lusko:

Anyhow, that comes out... Well, it's out now. Sorry. It's out August so...

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, by the time this airs out it'll be out.

Levi Lusko:

August 4th.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, that's awesome. What are you and Jennie learning about? Because she's an author now. She's got her own book. You're doing podcast together. She's very involved in the pastoring of your church. Now you're both published authors. What are you learning about being two creatives, being married, raising a family in leadership together?

Levi Lusko:

Not both of us should be writing a book at the same time. We learned that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Good lesson.

Levi Lusko:

There's only room in a house for one tortured artist. We learned that the hard way. But we also... I'm an author. My wife is an incredible leader. She's got such a gentle spirit. She's been just stepping into a new space. It's been tremendous for me to watch that happen. She took a series at our church and preached for a whole series which she had never done before. She had done odd Sunday here, Mother's Day or whatever. She did four messages back to back to back. After the first message, she broke her ankle. She did a month of Sundays while leading, while parenting, while dealing with all the normal things, but also in a boot with crutches. It was incredible to watch her spirit shine in such difficult circumstances.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's awesome. That is a great lesson for any aspiring creatives. Do not both write a book at the same time. We have attempted that as well. I think not having kids at home is a good remedy for that, but man.

Levi Lusko:

When you're writing and you get done with the day writing, you almost want to be able to come back almost as you're walking away from the typewriter and have your spouse be like, "Here's some tea, you got this, you did a great job." But when the other one's doing the same thing and you're both needing that emotional energy to come from each other almost like, "Oh, you made it through a day writing. Good job honey." I think it's better to alternate releases a little bit.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think that's a really good idea, so publishers take note. Levi, it's always a joy to talk to you and to talk to Jennie. I want to thank you so much for encouraging leaders. If people want to find the central hub for you online, where's the best place to send them? What website?

Levi Lusko:

I don't even know that question. I think probably Fresh Life Church. I think I do have a website somewhere. I'm joking.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And you're great to follow on Instagram too.

Levi Lusko:

Controversial these days, but it is what it is.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Hey, Levi, really appreciate you. Thank you so much for being with us.

Levi Lusko:

Thank you for having me, Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Don't you just love Levi, and wasn't that a great preview of the future church? I really think that's where things are going from where I can see. If you want more. We have it for you. You can go to CareyNieuwhof.com/Episode359. We'll get everything for you there including transcripts and show notes and highlights and links to our partners. If you're driving or running listening to this and you want to check out Pro Media Fire or you want to check out Gloo. Well, we've got those links for you as well to make it easier.

Carey Nieuwhof:

In a moment, I'm going to talk to you in the What I'm Thinking About segment about why sabbaticals don't work in my view. Before you get mad, hear me out, and why your time off probably isn't going to destress you this summer. We'll talk about that but in my next episode, I want you to hear this first. Here is an excerpt from my conversation with BELAY founder, Bryan Miles.

Bryan Miles:

Imagine if you and I were to go have a cup of coffee together, and I just said, "Hey, hold on one quick second." Then I dropped a sheet down between the middle of us. You couldn't see me, but we were having that meeting. That would be unacceptable, right? Well, somehow we let people do that on Zoom. "I'm just going to not be here, and I'm going to get the credit for being here, and you're not going to see me while I check my Instagram account or full boundary," or whatever the thing is you might be doing. That to me communicates, "I'm not present." We just made a decision several years ago that if you're on a Zoom call, you're present. I can see you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Brian, and I talk about virtual teams and so much more. Of course, as a subscriber, you get that absolutely for free. Bryan and his wife, Shannon, are also becoming serial entrepreneurs. They own multiple businesses, and we talk about that. It's just good to have Bryan back on the podcast next time. Also coming up, we've got Cathy Heller, Chris Hogan, Gordon MacDonald. Let's see, who else? Danielle Strickland. Man, we did that 1,000 years ago and we're finally bringing it to you, and Lecrae. Pumped for that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Now for What I'm Thinking About, which is brought to you by Gloo. You can learn more about your particular church's online audience, stuff you wouldn't believe by going to glooinights.com/carey. If you need some digital media help because your team's maxed out, go to promediafire.com/carey. Get 10% off plans for life. Remember, an entire creative suite of professionals for less than the cost of a staff hire. Happens when you check out that link at promediafire.com/carey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Here's What I'm Thinking About. Your time off. I know you're listening to this in summer. Some of you are back, but a lot of you have a few more weeks and you're like, "We got to get to the beach. We got to get to the mountains." You feel like you really need to destress. To be totally honest, you're nervous about the fall because you're like, "If I run as hard as I ran the spring, I'm toast by Christmas."

Carey Nieuwhof:

A lot of us live for our time off. I've been thinking a lot about this over the years, because of course I burned out years ago. I don't ever want to do that again. I don't want you to do that. Here's my conclusion these days. Time off doesn't work as a solution to your stress. Why not? Because it's an artificial construct. You go to this amazing place, whether it's a staycation, or a beach, or a resort, or wherever you go. The mountains, camping, it doesn't matter.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But you get this artificial thing where all the pressures melt away, and you're like, "Now I'm destressed." Then you go immediately back. How many times in your holidays have you gone back? Day one of going back, and you're exhausted by 11:00 AM and you're like, "I feel like I wasn't even away." And you're like what was that? See the problem isn't how you spend your time off. The problem is how you spend your time on. If your time on is unsustainable, all the time off in the world isn't going to help you. Time off won't heal you when your problem is how you spend your time on.

Carey Nieuwhof:

The problem for most of us is we spend our time on in an unsustainable way. When you're exhausted, how you spend your time off doesn't actually solve anything because the problem isn't what you did when you were off, it's what you do when you're on. The initial stages of a crisis require long hours and hard decisions. But when you head into a prolonged crisis, you need a new strategy. This is also why sabbaticals and leaves generally don't solve burnout.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Now they can be good if you want to study, you want to rest, you want to restore that's great. But if you have an unsustainable pace, a sabbatical isn't the solution. When your living and leading is broken, then all the time off in the world won't fix it. I've seen so many times where people take time off for a sabbatical. They're like, "Okay, I was almost burnt out. Now I'm fine. I'm going to be great." Then they get back and they're gone in a year. Why?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Because the sabbatical is wonderful, and maybe they got a lot better, but then they went into an unsustainable tempo. A sabbatical isn't the solution for an unsustainable pace. A sustainable pace is a solution. What's going to help? Well, I'm going to share one idea with you that can help. This is something I developed on the other side of burnout. I call it categorical decision making. Because as a leader all day long, what do you do? You make decisions. It's like decision, decision, decision. By 9:00 AM you've made 10 decisions. By noon, you made 50 and you're like, "I'm tired of decisions."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, they can get overwhelming because it's like, "Well, should I do this? Or should I do that? Or should I see this person? Or should I see that person." Years ago, I started to think in categories. Categorical decision making has helped me so much because what I do is I just think of categories. Let me give you an example. As our church grew, and this may not be the right solution for you, I just decided I'm not going to do weddings. The reason I didn't do weddings was because Saturdays was when my wife and kids were home and I wanted to spend time with them.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Now, we had a system for people who wanted to get married, et cetera but I'm like, "I'm not doing weddings." It was easy when someone said, "Will you do my wedding?" It's like, "Actually I've made that decision already. No, I won't." Same with funerals. Because when you have a big church, you've got to create a system for that. That started even when our church was really small because I was the local... I was Presbyterian at the time, Presbyterian guy. If somebody who hadn't been to church in 20 years wanted a Presbyterian funeral, I know that sounds like the 90s because it was the 90s, they would call me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

As our church started grow, that was one of the first categorical decisions I made. I'm like, "I only do funerals for people in our church." When our church got much bigger, it was like, "Okay, I have to be really selective about that." Pastoral visitation is a categorical decision. Here's one that's simpler. Breakfast meetings. I'm most productive in the morning. Generally, I do not do breakfast meetings. You might eliminate lunch meetings, or even meetings over an hour or much more.

Carey Nieuwhof:

When you start to think in categories, then your decision is already made. When COVID hit in my company now, I had a lot of internal decisions to make. We had to make sure that this survived, the podcast survived, all that stuff. The revenue model still worked which we're committed to free to use. We had to make sure all that worked. Even though I got a year of speaking canceled almost overnight, requests started to pour in. Free webinars. We do this webinar, we do a podcast interview. I had media calling about some pieces I was writing. We'd be on CBS News, et cetera.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We got overwhelmed and inundated and then I made a decision, because I had stuff to focus on. I'm not doing any outside interviews. Media, podcasts. I'm not doing any webinars. I'm not doing any online events. That made it easier because then we knew, by default, the answer was no. Categorical decision making frees up your bandwidth. Not only do you eliminate a lot of decision fatigue, but for you and your team, it becomes much easier to do that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Now. The question I always get is, "Well, Carey do you make exceptions?" Sometimes I do. If you're my best friend and you're like, "Will you do this event?" Yes. But I only have a couple of best friends, so that makes it easy. Or what about a wedding? It's like, "Well, if you're my niece, yeah, I'll participate in your wedding." Or if you're on my staff, "Yeah, I'll do your wedding." That eliminates it to 20 people. Not all of them get married every year. You're down to one or two times a year where you're like, "Yeah, I'm going to do that wedding." Or, "Yeah okay, I'll do that webinar." But you see how categorical decision making can help?

Carey Nieuwhof:

I hope that helps you. If you want more along these lines, I've got a free email that sends you daily doses of wisdom like this. We've got a course right now called Lead a Better Team. If you want to learn more about that, you can just text the word CAREY, my name, to 33777, and that'll take you to a link that you can subscribe. Get a daily dose of leadership wisdom. You can join 70,000 leaders who get that in their inbox every morning. All right guys, thank you so much. I really appreciate you, and I hope this conversation was as life giving to you as it was to me, and I do 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.