

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 185. My name is Carey Nieuwhof, and I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before. Well, back by popular demand we've got Greg Atkinson, and he was with me originally at episode 132. We talked about the first 10 minutes of when a new guest gets to your church, and that episode went crazy. You guys loved it, and so many of you have said, "Hey, you've got to have him back for more." So here we are.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You can listen, if you haven't yet, to episode 132. That'll sort of set you up to when a guest shows up in a parking lot, and what they do, and getting them into kids-min. It was really, really helpful. Today, we spent almost an hour talking about the next 10 minutes or the next hour, and I think you're really going to enjoy it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And whether you work in a church, or actually even if you do an online business, or you work in traditional business space, how you treat your guest is so important. And we all know it's important, and we all blow it. Because we start to think like an owner, not like a guest, and Greg really helps us figure this out. So, I think you're going to enjoy it. You can get shownotes at careynieuwhof.com/episode185, and to all of you who subscribe, thank you for that. And sharing along the way, as well. You guys have done a great job. This podcast continues to grow pretty much week by week. So thank you for getting the news out there.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I've also been on the road a lot lately, and you guys ... Man, you're so encouraging. Thank you. You guys really are the best, and I know there's a growing number of business leaders listening in as well. So if that's you, hey, welcome. We are so glad you're here, and we want to make this more helpful. So give us your feedback, hit us up online, let us know. I'm on all of the social channels, and you can find that in the shownotes at careynieuwhof.com/episode185, all the links to that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So, here's one of the questions. How do you train people in like the 21st century? I mean, for ages it was like gather people in a room and hope that they show up, and then do your hour or two hour content dump and hope that they remember. Well, things have changed, and Scott Magdalein is the founder and CEO of TrainedUp.church, and he's got a whole new way of doing it: on your phone. And whether you're a big church, little church, wherever you're at ... I asked Scott, "How does Trained Up make training accessible to users?" Here's what he had to say.

Scott Magdalein:

Yeah, learners will be able to access it from any internet connected device. So phone, tablet, computer. Also, you can access it from anywhere, of course, where there's internet. So you can ... They'll be able to

access it from home. They don't have to come to the church and use some special terminal with software loaded onto it. It's just the internet.

Scott Magdalein:

Also being able to track it. The ministry leader is able to see everyone in their system, all the learners in their system and what they've completed as well as their answers and their scores on those completed courses. So you can not only see who is engaged with it but also did they get it, did they understand the information you just gave them.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Man, if you are not doing digital training, you just need to get with the program. And if you head on over to trainedup.church now, here's the deal. They're going to give you some bonuses that come, because you're a listener to this podcast. So if you use the checkout code Carey, you're going to get 10% off for life. C-A-R-E-Y gets you 10% off Trained Up forever, just for being a listener. Plus there's a 30 day money back guarantee. So if you use it, you're like, "Nah, this isn't it," they're going to take care of you. So head on over to trainedup.church. Get with the way a massive number of churches are training their leaders, big and small. Use the coupon code Carey, C-A-R-E-Y, get 10% off for life.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Also, one more thing for you guys. Hey, have you registered yet for Rethink Leadership? Tickets are almost gone, and we've got a few, but not a ton, of tickets left for the Canadian Church Leaders Conference as well. Rethink Leadership happens in a month, can you believe it, in Atlanta, Georgia. You can go to rethinkleadership.com, and then canadianchurchleaders.ca gets you to the Canadian Church Leaders Conference.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You know, one of the questions me and my team get all the time is, "Hey, is there any chance we can talk? Any chance we can just get together? Any chance we can hang out?" Unfortunately, 99% of the time the answer has to be no or not right now. Because, you know, it's just it's hard. We've got a lot on the go, distance gets in the way, and so does schedule. However, if you want to hang out, these are the two events to do it at. Because I'm just going to be there for a few days at Rethink Leadership, and then I'm even hosting a party in my backyard at the Canadian Church Leaders Conference.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So if you want to hang out, this is how to do it. Come see me in Atlanta in April at rethinkleadership.com. You can register; April 25-27 is when we're doing that, and then June 14-16 here north of Toronto for the Canadian Church Leaders Conference in Canada, even in my backyard. CanadianChurchLeaders.ca. Less than 100 tickets left for each event. So, head on over soon. And in the meantime, let's jump into my conversation with Greg Atkinson.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well Greg, welcome back. A long overdue part two to episode 132 of this podcast which got rave reviews from people. I think it was one of the top 10 of 2017. And also, a blog post I wrote about it was one of the top blog posts of 2017. This whole thing of just first time guests, how to lose a first time guest in 10 minutes or less. It's not that hard to do, is it?

Greg Atkinson:

No, no, and I'm glad to be back. Thank you for having me. This was a fun episode, that 132 that we did, and I'm glad to jump into part two.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. So Greg, you wrote a book called ... Is it The Secrets of a Secret Church Shopper. Did I get that right?

Greg Atkinson:

Secrets of a Secret Shopper. There's no church in it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Secret Shopper, got you.

Greg Atkinson:

Yep.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, you titled it much better than I did, but yeah it's that idea this is what you do, right? You go into churches, and you have a list, and we talked about, "Is that consumeristic or not?" And I thought you gave a great answer to that. So please, if you haven't heard episode 132, or it's been a year, go back and listen to these back to back. Because we're just going to pick up.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So what happened was, we went for over an hour, and we only got through literally the first 10 minutes of somebody's visit, and we didn't even get into the auditorium, did we? It was like by the time they opened the door and met the greeter, that's where it's like, "Okay, that was a full episode. We'll have to have you back for part two." So here we are.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So let's start with a recap for those who maybe it's been a while, or they've never listened to episode 132, and I would encourage you to go back and drill down on it because it was so good, but can you just give them the highlights of like, okay from the time a guest decides, "I'm coming to your church on Sunday." What are three, four, five quick bullet points that every leader needs to think about, "Yes I need to pay attention to this?" Just pick us up there.

Greg Atkinson:

Sure. What we talked about, being prepared. Company's coming. Are you prepared? If a company was coming over to your house, you would vacuum, you would dust, you would have a nice smell in the air. Just preparing for company, guests. Even when I pastored a small church, we had guests every single Sunday, every single Sunday. And so you never know when it's somebody's first Sunday, and so we need to do all we can to be prepared. And that means a number of things, and then we backed it all the way up to starting with the website. You know, are we expecting guests to check out our website? Because

most people check you out online before they come in person. And so, is there an I Am New or What to Expect page?

Greg Atkinson:

Then we went to, you know when they arrive, is there somebody in the parking lot to greet them? Is there somebody holding the door for them? Is there somebody helping them check in their kids, the children's ministry? And we talked about those best people that bend down to the kids' eye and look them in the eye and say, "Hey, my name's Carey. How are you? What's your name?" And get them registered and then having somebody just kind of walk them through, "Here's our auditorium. Here's where you can go be seated."

Greg Atkinson:

Every single moment of those first two minutes counts, and they're taking it all in, and they are thinking through, "Is this fake? Is this confusing? Is this nerve wracking?" You know, a lot of people are intimidated. They're skeptical. They are ... Some are terrified. They somehow got talked into coming, and they don't know what to expect, what to think. They don't know if we're a cult. They're inside freaking out, and so anything that we can do to be warm and welcoming and to let them know, "Hey, it's going to be okay. Today's going to be a great day."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. And you know, I can think about that. We talked about excellence as well, and we want to make those great. But let's flip it while we're still on that recap. What are some of the biggest mistakes churches will make? From, you know, the website to the parking lot to check-in. What are some things? Just so we hear ourselves in the story going, "Oh yeah, we don't do that," or like, "Uh-oh, I think we do that." Where do you see churches get it wrong in those areas?

Greg Atkinson:

Well, on the website it would be not having an area that is created specifically for guests. If a newcomer checks out your website and all they see is internal discussion: this event, and this event, and this event, and nothing of, "Here's what to expect when you visit," that would be a mistake. That's one of the main things that I talk with church leaders about is have an I'm New button, have a What to Expect button.

Greg Atkinson:

A lot of churches now, we were talking about this in my Facebook group, a lot of churches are doing What to Expect videos of where it's a pastor or a staff member saying, "Hey, when you get here, you can expect," blank, and then they just kind of give them an overview of the day. When it comes to those mistakes, I've seen this over and over, and that is parking lot people that don't know their role. Meaning they're bunched up, gathered up, talking to each other. They're deep in conversation.

Carey Nieuwhof:

They're on coffee break, right?

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah. They're deep in conversation. They are just oblivious to cars pulling in. They're just gabbing, gabbing, gabbing, and that's even worse than not having somebody out there. If you see guys bunched

up talking, and so I've said for years you need to have guys spread out all throughout the parking lot where they have to talk either with hand signals or with radios, and a lot of churches use radios.

Greg Atkinson:

Then we even talked about hey, this matters in small churches as well. Even if you don't have a parking problem, even if people have no issue finding a parking space, you can still be that first frontline, that first person greeting, and waving, and welcoming.

Greg Atkinson:

We talked about there are companies out there like Pop Signs or Church Inc. that have the welcome signs that I've got some somewhere in my office, but you hold it up and it says, "We're glad you are here," or, "Expecting great things," or, "You can sit with me," but they have these signs that they hold up, and you could be a church plan of 30 people and have somebody in the parking lot holding a sign that says, "We're glad you're here." So it's not just about directing traffic. That's for larger churches.

Greg Atkinson:

So as far as mistakes, having people out there that are clueless to people coming and deep in conversation. For greeters, if you're in conversation with the other greeter, you're standing across from doors, and you're just talking talking as people are walking through, you're talking over them. And then two big things that I've mentioned before: one, don't have a cup of coffee in your hand. Have your hands free, and that means no cell phone as well. One of the worst first impressions is for you to be opening a door for a guest but looking down at your cell phone. And so-

Carey Nieuwhof:

It probably does happen, doesn't it?

Greg Atkinson:

It happens all of the time, and so I tell people, lock it away. Leave it in your car. Turn it off. Just turn it completely off, but if you need to know what time it is, I wear a watch. Just glance down at your watch," but if a guest comes up and they see you looking down reading somebody's text, it's a horrible, horrible first impression. And then lastly, when it comes to children's ministry check-in. If you have a bottleneck, if you have not put in place efficient processes where people come, and they register for the first time, and they get in the database, they get in the system, they get checked in.

Greg Atkinson:

I've seen churches that have a line of people waiting, and they get frustrated and flustered, and they think, "Why can't I just drop my kid off and go straight into the service? Why am I standing here waiting in line?" They don't understand that we have background check people. They don't understand that we take safety and security seriously. They just think, "Let me drop my kid off in childcare and rush into the service."

Greg Atkinson:

If you make them wait unnecessarily and have them waiting in a long line that is not efficient and is not running smoothly, they're going to get very frustrated and even sometimes grab their kids by the arm and say, "Let's leave. Let's get out of here."

Greg Atkinson:

And so one of the things that I think will happen more in the future. I've been a voice for this for the past year. I've been speaking out about it, and I'm trying to encourage companies to pursue this. I think in the future on the What to Expect page or the I'm New page on your website, you should be able to register your kids and go ahead and sign up, and it says, "Register your kids here." You put in their name, their birthdate, their grade, their allergies. You put all of that in. You get integrated into the database. When you show up on Sunday morning, you'll say, "Hey, Atkinson family? Oh great, we've been expecting you. Here's your sticker," and you're off and running. It can be-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, it's two minutes, not 20 minutes, then. Right?

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so-

Carey Nieuwhof:

You know, and we do that for all of our regular families. I don't know that we do that for guests, but that's really a good idea is you can preregister, and that cuts it. And then if you think about it, that makes a lot of sense. Because if you have a lot of kids, we have a lot of kids, and there were times, not so much anymore but a few years ago, where the lineup could be 20 people long to get in, and it was so long. I have left lineups to restaurants because of that. I've left lines to stores. Like, "Oh, there's a line. I'm not going there." You think, "Oh, well this is church. They're going to make an exception," but people don't, right? People are people, and they'll be like, "Okay, that's it. I'm gone."

Carey Nieuwhof:

As a driven, impatient man, I understand that. That's super helpful, and again episode 132 has about an hour on those first 10 minutes. So let's pick up where we left off and get into the auditorium. We never even got into the auditorium, the sanctuary, whatever you call it in your tradition. And so now people are actually entering into the main room for the first time as adults. They've parked their kids. They've been greeted already. They've made it that far. Let's pick up the dialogue there. Pre-service as people are getting seated, what are some good practices and some bad practices, Greg?

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, you and I were talking one time about setting and environment and atmosphere. I think pre-service is huge. Because it kind of gives you a feel and a vibe for the day. Whether you have upbeat music playing, instrumental music playing. Whether your band is playing, just jamming before the service. Everything means something, and so how you have created that atmosphere is huge. And so when I walk into a church, I'm looking for what's playing overhead on the speakers and sound system. I'm looking for what's on the screens. Are there announcement slides? Are there welcome slides? Is there a welcome video? Is there a countdown video from a minute leading up to the service?

Greg Atkinson:

I was mentioning to you that my home church is Elevation Church here in Charlotte, North Carolina, and their last minute of the countdown people are clapping and cheering, and it's just ... It is so upbeat, and

energetic, and exciting. You've never seen anybody respond to a countdown like they do at Elevation, but there's something in the air that is exciting.

Greg Atkinson:

And so what, I'm going to back up, what will kill all of that is if I walk into your auditorium and the band is still rehearsing. That is a nightmare. That is the worst thing ever, and I have seen it countless times. When I walk into a church and the band is still up there, "Hey, let's sing that again. Let's practice that again. Today we're going to go out of this and into this." You have to have all of that wrapped up. I don't care if you arrive at 6:00AM, you have got to have this stuff wrapped up.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah you're right, and sometimes it's not even rehearsal, it's practice. It's like, "Yeah, it really is practice."

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, yeah. They're learning the songs, yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

They're learning the song at five to nine. Oh yeah, ehh.

Greg Atkinson:

And so I want to see the stage clean, clear, neat, tidy, all musicians behind the scenes, green room, backstage, wherever. They're out of there. There's maybe a little dim light or dark light depending on your context. There's maybe a backlight on the stage, something that looks very appropriate visually and just creates a nice vibe and atmosphere with some music playing. That music should reflect where you're going in the service. If it's going to be, for example, if it's Good Friday, if you're doing a Good Friday service and you're playing upbeat dance music, that's probably not the right thing.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You're doing Bruno Mars before Good Friday, probably a mistake.

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, so if you're going to have one of those services that's completely dark and everybody leaves in silence like a lot of churches do, then you need to have some very somber, reflective songs as people are coming in. If you're going to be raising the roof and having an exciting time then have some upbeat music playing. I've been in a lot of traditional services where they just have a piano playing instrumentally, or a piano and organ, or just an organ. But just kind of creating the moment.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Can I just push back? Because I mean, I'm with you. I get that, but I want to ask why. Because there are some people who are like, "Great, so where's God in this? Can't we just relax? Why is this so hyper-programed?" Just how do you engage the people who give you pushback over stuff like that? Like, why can't the band just be themselves, and why does there have to be a countdown? And why do we have to pay attention to lights? And oh my goodness, really? You have to think about a playlist? What do you say to people who just push back on that? Because people do.

Greg Atkinson:

I think everybody's familiar with the word muzak that they play in elevators. It calms you. People play music in elevators so that you don't feel alone, you don't feel suffocated, and that you're a little calm. When you walk into an auditorium, you've got a lot of nerves and emotions happening. And so, if we can calm people and set the atmosphere, and the mood with upbeat or calming music, that allows God to be able to begin to work on people's hearts. We never know at what moment that God is starting to draw them to Himself. It may be a wave in the parking lot. It may be the person that checked you and your kid into children's ministry. It may be the usher that seated you. It may be as you sit and you finally have caught your breath, you've made it into the parking lot, you've made it into the ... Maybe you're not a people person at all. Maybe you're an introvert, and you've made it past all of these smiling, friendly faces. You've got your kids checked in. You sit down, you catch your breath, and there's something playing over the sound system that just kind of brings peace to you and calms you and calms those nerves. I want people to be as warm and welcoming as possible, and that includes your tech team, your musicians, yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And I guess part of it is like we've ... I don't know, I'm sure you've had this experience, Greg, but I've been to restaurants for date night with my wife, and I realized I picked the wrong venue because the music is thumping, and it's so loud we can't have a conversation. And like, you know, I don't want to be out at club night. If I want to be at club night, I'll go to a club. But you know, the restaurant's too loud or the music is inappropriate or it's weird, or there's no music and it's too ... Have you ever been in a too quiet restaurant where it's just creepy?

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And you're like, "I can't even talk to her. Because the people in the kitchen are going to hear me," and you're the only people in the restaurant, and it's weird. I mean, that is a ... Yeah, that's a serious issue. I guess on that human level, we can either be an obstacle or we can be an invitation to people heading into worship. And I guess whatever we do, it's, you know, it's going to be an issue.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Is it like that kind of thing?

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, I would also add it's important when you open the doors. If your band is still practicing, don't open the doors yet. Nobody wants to sit and watch your band practice, or rehearse, or run through the runthrough of the day. And so if you need to, have the ushers close the doors of the auditorium, and people wait in the lobby and wait in the foyer, and then when you open the doors up and people start to be seated, like I said the stage should be neat, clear, clean, tidy. There should be music playing overhead. There should be slides happening on the screens, but be intentional. I use this word too much, but it's intentional. It's intentional that I use the word intentional. Be strategic and intentional about everything you do. Know when you're going to open the doors. Know when you're going to wrap

up the runthrough, when you want the stage to be clear, when you've got the slides ready to go, and the mood set, and the music playing, the lights dimmed. Plan through each and everything.

Greg Atkinson:

I've said to other leaders, "I don't care what size you are or how old you are as a congregation, there's no excuse for being sloppy." We should be prepared and ready, whether you're a church plant of 20 people meeting in a movie theater or an elementary school cafeteria, you should be prepared and ready for guests.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Do you have any theories on what we call holding the doors? That's a change we made. Because we're usually done 15 to 45 minutes before any service begins. Again, that's not practice. That's like any final rehearsal notes or sound adjustments, they're done well in advance. And we used to open maybe 15 minutes before the service, but then you get like those eight people who come super early, and they're usually older. And what we've been doing is we've been holding the doors until about five to or four minutes to, and then people kind of congregate in the foyer, and then we let them in. Because it creates a greater sense of momentum and anticipation. Any thoughts on that? I'm sure it's not one size fits all, but I'd just love your take on it.

Greg Atkinson:

No, I have said it a lot. Even Elevation, where I go, they hold the door until about 10 minutes, and then they start packing people in. It does build anticipation. It also ... I've said for years, when it comes to congregation size and seating, and should we go to two services or three services, I've talked about a concept that I learned from a friend at Life.Church, and that he calls it the intensity of density. And that's why Elevation Church at my campus and at all other campuses, they use a lot of pipe and drape. They will rope off 100 seats, and when they fill 100 then they'll bring the pipe and drape back and broaden it to 150, and when they fill that they'll bring it back to 200. They can go all the way back to 1,500 at my campus.

Greg Atkinson:

But if you come to a 1:30 or 4:00PM service, you're going to see 200 seats available. And so there's the intensity of density, and you mentioned if you open the doors too early and there's six people seated in there, it can feel kind of low morale, low momentum, negative, down. And so closing the doors, holding the doors, building that sense of anticipation. Then having a rush of people going through.

Greg Atkinson:

Craig Groeschel for years has talked about momentum and morale, and so I think having thought through ... We are expecting about 150 people today. Let's open up 200 seats and kind of rope off the others and pack them in, that intensity of density.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a good phrase.

Greg Atkinson:

There's a lot of logic behind that, a lot of strategy behind that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I get this question a lot from church leaders, it's not in the notes, but how full is too full? There's this general thought that for a growing church, when you're 80% full you're full. Is that true?

Greg Atkinson:

It is a pretty well known rule. I do stick to that for the most part. I will say I have led, as a campus pastor at a multisite church, campuses where we were maybe 65-70% full, and we felt full. And we were looking at adding another service just being 65-70% full. There's some churches ... There does get to be a point when you get 80%, 85%, 90% full that people can't find a seat, and they get frustrated. Especially when, a lot of churches do this when the lights are down and it's dark, I have secret shop churches, large churches, where I could not find a seat and that I get out to the overflow, and then I meet with the team afterwards, and I said, "Man, there wasn't a single seat there."

Greg Atkinson:

And they say, "What are you ... Are you kidding? There was like 300 open seats."

Greg Atkinson:

I said, "Well, it didn't look like it from where I was." And a lot of ushers will use the flashlights. You'll see them kind of directing people with the flashlights, and pointing to empty seats, and asking, but I have been at situations where I didn't think there was a single seat available, and I find out later that there was several. And so-

Carey Nieuwhof:

And where does that hit? Does that hit at 90%? Does that hit at 85%? Because I've heard like 80% you come in with your family of four or with two friends or whatever, and the challenge becomes finding you four or five seats together. And I get that, but yeah I think we've all been in that place. They're probably ... There's a bunch of empty seats in the front corners, way off to the wings, right? But you can't see that when you're in the middle aisle. You can't see that. The ushers may not even know that. So where are the ... And this, again, works for a church of 100. This works for a church of 1,000, works for a church of 10,000 where you hit certain percentages where it's hard to find seats. Is there a general rule behind that? I do get this question a lot, so I'm really curious about the answer.

Greg Atkinson:

I don't want to go against something I've heard for years. I would stick with the 80% rule. I think there's a lot of wisdom behind that. I don't know who was the first to come up with that, but I do think there's a lot of wisdom there. I saw Star Wars when it came out, the new Star Wars: The Last Jedi. We got there super early because we wanted to find five seats together as a family. If we had got there a few minutes before the movie started, if it hadn't sold out yet, they may say, "Yeah, there's five seats in there somewhere," but for us to be able to sit together, and you don't realize it but little things like that can really upset or frustrate a guest. If they come with their family of three, a teenager and a mom and dad, and they can't sit together? They're going to get upset, and they may not return.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And then eventually does that, and this is for growing churches or full churches, do you basically cap out at that point? Because people self select out? It's like, "I'm not going to go because I can't get a seat or we can't sit together," does that eventually just create an artificial cap to your growth?

Greg Atkinson:

I would say no, simply because as you know we don't want to ever put God in a box, and I have seen churches that ... Oh, I've been a part of churches where we had a video venue on site, on our campus. We had an overflow room, a video venue-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh right, but I'm saying if you don't do overflow, if you don't make any changes at all. That if you're just like, "Hey, we've got to fill up the last 20% before we launch something new, an overflow, a video venue, a new service, is that an artificial cap on your growth?"

Greg Atkinson:

I think that would be dangerous if you tried to get 100% full.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, yeah.

Greg Atkinson:

I think that would be dangerous.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay, no that's good. So we've talked about pre-service. See, this is why it's so much fun talking to you. Here we are 25 minutes in. We got through the three minutes before the service begins, but this is the stuff that honestly not enough people think about, and you had told me before we started recording, like you're doing a behind the scenes at Disney. Disney thinks about this stuff.

Greg Atkinson:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right? Disney thinks about this stuff. They think about the cleanliness of the streets. They think about the washrooms. They think about being in character. They think about all of these things, and the church should be one of the most welcoming missions in the world.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay, musically what are some good and bad practices in the service? You talked about the pre-service music, and again whatever your tradition. If that's organ or piano, or of it's a mainstream playlist, or if it's worship music, you got to be sensitive to the mood. And, you know, don't have your worship team practicing while there are guests in the room, please. What are some other musical practices that are good and bad?

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, this is something I love evaluating when I do a secret shopper. A lot of people don't realize it, but I was a worship pastor for 11 years. My degree's actually in music, and so I pay special attention to this. I said on the first podcast we did together, I don't care if you're a Church of Christ singing acapella, or a traditional church with a pipe organ, or a choir and orchestra, or a rock band, everything should be done with excellence. Excellence transcends.

Greg Atkinson:

I think regardless of your music style, there's no excuse for being unprepared. I mentioned earlier of being sloppy or even having moments of awkwardness. As a worship leader, I worked very hard at transitions. I didn't want there to be any dead time between songs. I would have one song go right into the next song, right into the next song, but really working through transitions and arrangements, and avoiding those awkward moments of looking at somebody of, "Are you starting this? Am I starting this? Are you going to ..." looking at the pianist, or, "Can you do the intro?" Or, "Is the guitarist doing the intro?" You know, all of that needs to be worked out before maybe at a midweek rehearsal, and then you do a runthrough on Sunday morning.

Greg Atkinson:

By the way, every church, I'll say this, from being a worship pastor then a producer at a large church, you have to do a complete runthrough on Sunday morning before the service starts-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, we do that. We start 90 minutes before. Actually, we start earlier than that. We'll start like setup two hours before the service begins. So it's a 7:00AM call, sometimes 6:30AM call, and then everybody who's on the platform is there 90 minutes before the first service begins.

Greg Atkinson:

That's good, and yeah so you want to back up your time to how much time you need for that runthrough. Some churches do an hour service. Some churches do an hour and a half service. And this is important because I don't know who all's listening and what their experience, background, size of church, but this is important. There's a time, and I've always done it for years midweek, there's a time for rehearsal. There's a time to learn the music. There's a whole ... We could back up and do a whole worship talk about using planning center and giving your musicians music to listen to and chord charts to practice throughout the week so that they show up Sunday prepared.

Greg Atkinson:

Then Sunday morning, you want to start with a true soundcheck. You just check each instrument. You soundcheck the drums, the keys, the bass, the guitar, the vocals. That's the soundcheck. That's separate. You soundcheck the pastor's mic which is important, and unfortunately a lot of churches don't do it. Then you do a complete runthrough, beginning to end. This, then this, then this, then this. You go through every transition. If somebody's walking on stage, have them walk on stage. If they walk off stage, have them walk off stage. If there's an announcement, have them come up. If you're a campus pastor at a multisite church, we practice announcements. We practice our welcome. We practice our closing.

Greg Atkinson:

If you're doing an announcement at a church, you need to come up on stage and say what you're going to say. You need to actually practice it. Don't let Sunday morning live be the first time you say that announcement. A complete runthrough.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, now and just to clarify too, and I mean we went through different incarnations of this, but we have, just picking on our church, Connexus Church, Wednesday night is rehearsal. But the band actually has to show up practiced to rehearsal. It's not like, "Oh, I've never seen this song before. Gosh, I wonder how it goes." It's like, "No, you've been practicing for several hours already, maybe a day. You know this song. You know how it goes. Now you've got to work out the exact arrangement and how the bass, and the guitar, and the vocalist, and how does that go." But you are prepared. You're not learning the song at rehearsal.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And then for runthrough, that is not practice. That's like Sunday morning, it's just you know your stuff cold. But that's where you discover, and I love how you talk about even walking off stage. I can't tell you the number of times that after a message or you're hosting or something, and you realize, "Oh, if I take the usual path, today I'm going to run into the background vocalist." So either you need to move, or I need to move, or whatever. But that gets rid of all the awkward that you often have in a service that is unrehearsed.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Now again, I'm going to ask this question. I'll probably ask it again before we're done. People are like, "You guys are crazy. Why does that even matter? This is all for Jesus, all for God. Can't we just lead out of our hearts, Greg? Give me a break." What do you say to people like that?

Greg Atkinson:

I think there's beauty to order. There's also beauty to excellence. I value excellence. And so one of my pet peeves is worship leaders, they use music stands. There are worship leaders around the country that can say, "Yeah, Greg dinged us on that. Greg came in, did an evaluation, and I nearly lost my job because I used a music stand." I don't like to see any barriers in the way.

Greg Atkinson:

Now your band, that's different. If your keyboard player needs to look at sheet music, that's fine. If your guitarist has chords down on the floor that he's looking down at, that's fine. I get that as an instrumentalist.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, we're like, "Nobody gets music on stage for anything." That's us.

Greg Atkinson:

Right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But fair enough.

Greg Atkinson:

But if you are a vocalist, a worship leader, or a background singer, you should have no music stand in front of you. I am all for prompt screens in the back. I don't have an issue with that if you need a prompt screen, but it should be a true prompt. You should know the song well enough that if you look up and see the first word of the next verse, you're off and running, and you can engage with people.

Greg Atkinson:

And so when you're practiced and prepared, and you've done the runthrough, you've rehearsed as a band, as a vocal team, and you have removed barriers like music stands out of the way so that you can make eye contact, or leading people in worship, you can engage with the room just like a pastor engages with the audience. You can look out and make eye contact, and lead people in worship with a smile on your face. Then God can do some amazing stuff. Worship should be interactive, engaging, participatory, spirit filled.

Greg Atkinson:

I have found over the years that the more practiced and prepared we were, the more we as musicians were able to worship ourselves. And that, my friend, is contagious.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You've got to get yourself out of the way.

Greg Atkinson:

[crosstalk 00:38:01]-

Carey Nieuwhof:

And if you don't know what you're doing, you are in the way.

Greg Atkinson:

Yes, and if you know the songs well enough that you can actually play unto God and worship with them, there's something powerful about that and contagious where God allows you to usher people into his presence in a mighty way. Whereas if you're glued to a music stand and looking down and looking at G chord, C chord, D chord, G, and you're caught up in the notes, you can't expect people to sing along and engage and interact in worship. And so I'm a big, big proponent of being prepared, and practiced, and ready. When that happens, and that's what I look for, when you are prepared, and practiced, and ready, then the music stands go away.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And does that go for preachers too, Greg? I mean, there's a whole debate in preacher circle, and I'll take the rap for this. I'll get the hate mail for this. But like, you know, manuscript preaching versus ... Listen, I

know people who walk in there with a full manuscript, but they're not reading their message. They know it, it's there as a backup, but I'm a bulletpoint preacher, and I've got a prompt screen at the back. But like, do you need that kind of seamless experience to really be able to connect with your congregation?

Greg Atkinson:

Well, I want to always preface things with, "I don't want to put God in a box." So God can do as He pleases. Even with a horrible musician, God can move. But when it comes to preaching, I've seen it all as you have. Bill Hybels preaches from a manuscript, and he may not read every single word, but he knows where he's going and what he wants to say. I actually worked on staff with a lead pastor who had a complete manuscript in front of him. You would never know it. You would think he was preaching from memory, but he had every word in front of him. I'm like you. I like to use bullet points and to look down at a prompt and to see where I'm going next when I guest preach.

Greg Atkinson:

I think there's a whole new generation of pastors that use iPads, but the ones that I see most effective hold it in their ... They use an iPad mini, and they hold it in their hand a lot of times as they're preaching. If you are reading off a sermon, then you're going to bore people to tears. It's kind of like the Beuller, Beuller. It's just going to feel academic. It's going to feel like they're in a classroom environment.

Greg Atkinson:

But if you know where you're going enough that you can use prompts, and bullet points, and things to keep you on track and guide you, and then you kind of fill in the gaps, if you ... And this is something that goes back to preparedness that we talked about with musicians. If you do not know what you want to say, what stories you want to share, what examples and illustrations you want to use, you're going to be in trouble.

Greg Atkinson:

And so as a communicator, as a pastor, you need to practice and prepare during the week so that Sunday morning you're not bound by your notes, and you know in your heart you've studied enough that you feel confident that you can teach away from notes. It's good to walk away from the pulpit from time to time. It's good to walk across the stage.

Greg Atkinson:

I was on staff with Pete Briscoe at Bent Tree Bible in Dallas, and he would walk from one end of the stage to the other. Every now and then, he would stand back behind a music stand, but then the rest of the time he would walk to one stage and preach over on one side, and back and forth. As you know, Andy Stanley uses the big screen TV. There's a whole new generation of pastors that have adopted that model, but he's not reading word for word, obviously. He's reading a scripture, and then he points to some key words, and he reads a point, a bullet point, and he points to it. And then he elaborates on it. And so one of the things that troubles me is when a sermon feels academic in nature. If it feels like I'm sitting in a seminary class, that bothers me. I think we have to strive for transformation, not information.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I think the other thing too, and if you're just reading from your notes, not even using a manuscript but reading from your notes, my theory is people don't believe you, that there's a believability that

diminishes with that. Because they think, "Well, if you really believed it, you would just tell me." Like you know, and this interview's a good example. I sent you 15 questions, but like you're not reading from notes. You're just shooting from the hip, and there's an authenticity, there's an honesty to that that I think is a better communication style. Yeah, I hear what you're saying. I think that's important.

Carey Nieuwhof:

The other thing, for those of you who are manuscript readers, and I was one at one point. So I've learned how to kind of break free and shoot from the hip, but best advice I ever got was from Tom Long who at that time was at Princeton, and he simply said, "Don't memorize your talk. Understand it."

Greg Atkinson:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And that is ... If you just think about that, don't memorize it, but like you understood where you were going. In a normal conversation, you're like, "Oh, I've got to tell them that garbage collection day is Wednesday, not Thursday." You're not worried about that. It's like, "Hey, Greg. Did you know the garbage collector, the trash guy, is coming a day late?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

"Oh, I didn't know that."

Carey Nieuwhof:

"Okay, yeah. You've got to have it out Wednesday, not Thursday, or it's a day early, or whatever," but you know. It's the way you navigate life, and if you can just be like, "Today, I want to tell you. You've got to go where the evidence leads, not where you hope it will lead." That's sort of your big idea for Sunday, and you just kind of hang everything off it. That can be incredibly liberating. Anything else for preachers? You talked about worship. What about for preachers?"

Greg Atkinson:

I pray for preachers every weekend, every weekend. I'll a lot of times-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Thank you. We need it.

Greg Atkinson:

I'll post that on social media saying, "I'm praying for you." Because I was never a lead pastor where I preached every week, but I was a campus pastor where I preached enough to stress about it and appreciate it. I also have taught on communication for years at pastor's conferences. I enjoy it. I understand it, but there is such a weight and a burden to it that it's a special person with a true calling that can do that week in and week out. And so my thoughts and prayers and encouragement always go to them. I realize it is not an easy task, that it's very difficult, and so with that being said, the burden, the tough part, is the prep, the research, the preparation.

Greg Atkinson:

I worked with a pastor who had all of the degrees: Master's, doctorate, had won some kind of theology award at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was brilliant. He knew the bible. He understood theology. However, he had the most simplistic messages I've ever heard, and we were just growing, and growing, and growing, and we would baptize hundreds of people every year, and I once, I said ... I asked a friend, I said, "I'm not understanding how we're growing so much. Because it's like he's talking to a child or to a teenager."

Greg Atkinson:

And somebody said, "You have to understand something deeply to explain it simply." And so I think if you have put the work and the sweat, blood, sweat, and tears, if you have put the sweat, and the time, and the preparation into it, you can explain it simply. It doesn't need to feel like a seminary class or academic. It needs to be transformational and conversational and engaging. The other side of that I would say to pastors is the best pastors I know, the best, have a sense of humor, and they let their humor come out.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You can laugh at yourself. I mean, self-deprecating humor, I need seem to run out of material. So that's good.

Greg Atkinson:

But I've seen pastors from Andy Stanley to Steven Furtick to Craig Groeschel to Rick Warren that will make a joke in passing, you know that would ... You'll have people on the edge of their seat at one moment, and then laugh for a moment, and then you draw them back in. And that's what a good communicator does.

Greg Atkinson:

I have this picture that I had on my office wall for years as a pastor. It's a class picture called Jesus Laughing, and it had Jesus with this big ole laugh, and it just underneath simply said "Jesus laughing." We don't have to guess where we got our sense of humor from and where laughter and humor comes from. Our God is a creative God. We see that in how we design, and craft, and lead worships, experiences, and music. Our God is a God of order, not a God of chaos, and our God gave us the gift of laughter. And so I agree with what you said. Don't take yourself too seriously.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, that's good tips. What about hosting? Hosting/announcement/offering. You know, those two or three breaks in the service where you're welcoming people. Do's and don'ts for those hosting slots.

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, I'm glad we're going to touch on this. Because this is one of my favorite things to talk about. Let's start with offering because it's so key. We actually, I'm doing a first impression's conference, and there's a whole session just on giving an offering talk, just on giving a giving talk. I have seen churches blow it when it comes to the offering. I consulted last year with a church somewhere in America. I'm not going to say where, but it was a decent sized church, a church of about 1,800 people, and they absolutely blew it when it came to the offering.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What did they do?

Greg Atkinson:

It was a high pressure sales ... I felt like somebody was trying to sign me up for some multilevel marketing scheme. It was high, high, high pressure. It was a 15 minute setup before the offering.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What?!

Greg Atkinson:

They talked about the offering for 15 minutes before they took the offering.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Was it like a capital campaign, they were trying to raise \$2 million in a day?

Greg Atkinson:

No. Well actually, yeah they were renovating, and I don't know if that played into it. But when I did their report, I said, "I would not come back to your church simply because of the offering moment." It was so bad. That was the biggest standout. It was the worst part of the whole weekend experience.

Greg Atkinson:

The other thing was it came across very slick, non-churchy, non-sacred, and what I mean by that was they had, as he was giving this and talking, and talking, and talking, there was a slide behind him, a big, big screen behind him, that had all the ways that you could give. And it had email, text to give, online giving. It had the Visa Mastercard logos down in the corner. It had the Amex, the Discover, every logo. It was the busiest slide I've ever seen. My pitch ... My wife actually took a picture of it, and we were doing it together. Sometimes I like to bring my family, and she said, "Did you notice the credit card symbols at the bottom?"

Greg Atkinson:

I said, "No way," and she showed me the picture, and there was all the Visa, Mastercard, Discover, Amex, and I was like, "Oh my gosh." It was brutal. It was brutal. Now here's the thing that ... Oh, and it gets worse. I didn't tell you the worst part.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But wait, there's more.

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, but wait there's more. So, the pastor went into this big sales pitch, talked about giving, but the thing that irked me the most was this was a believer's focused service, and you and I have talked about they're in the room. There are guests there every single Sunday. So we need to prepare, and plan, and communicate like we expect guests to be in the room, like we expect lost people to be in the room. Or maybe even Christians that aren't members or bought into the vision, and they're not going to give.

They're just visiting. Or maybe they're church shopping, they're checking you out, but they're not going to give anything.

Greg Atkinson:

And so this pastor did this thing where he said, "Okay, you can give online, you can text to give," and he held his cellphone up in the air, and he said, "Once you've given, stand up and hold your phone up in the air," and people all around us started standing and holding their phones up in the air, and my wife and I were sitting down, looking around at all of these people standing up, and we were like, "I guess we should stand. Because we look horrible just sitting down like we didn't give," and so he had the whole congregation stand up holding their phones in the air, and we didn't give a dime, but we stood holding our arms up so we didn't get embarrassed. It was brutal, brutal.

Greg Atkinson:

When they brought me in they said, "We've hit a plateau. We've been at 1,800 people for about eight years," and I said, "Well, you're hitting believers every week. You're not doing something that communicates to a newcomer in anyway that they would feel comfortable and want to stick around, and so you have a huge backdoor."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. Well, I think that's a very graphic description of when we put too much pressure on, but here's a question I'm getting regularly from church leaders. A lot of people are now tipping, or for years have been tipping the other way, going, "We don't even want to talk about money. We don't want to talk about, 'Hey, man. If you don't,'" and I did this for a while like, "Hey, you don't have to give if it's your first time. If it's your 12th time, you don't have to give."

Carey Nieuwhof:

I get questions all the time from church leaders who are like, "We just stopped receiving an offering. We just put a box in the back, and if people want to give they can give, and after all half the giving, most of the giving, is online anyway. So we don't need to do an offering moment." Any thoughts on that?

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, I've seen it done both ways with pass the plate and a box in the back. I've been on staff at churches that do it both ways, box in the back and pass the plate. Either or, I mean. I don't have a theological issue either way. I think if you want to drop your offering in box or if you drop it in a plate, it doesn't bother me either way. I will say, though, that there is something special that God can use when you do a proper giving talk, when you share a story and say, "Hey, because of your generosity, last week we were able to feed this many people at the local shelter. Thank you for your generosity. Thank you for your support."

Greg Atkinson:

When you can highlight, "Hey, we just had a team come back from Guatemala, and they were able to give out this many supplies and medicine, we just want to thank you for your generous support and giving. When you give here, it goes all around the world." You know, just taking those-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, we just baptized 15 students in our student ministry, and here are some of their stories. This is what you make possible. Yeah.

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, and we were able to scholarship kids to go to summer camp, and here's what God did. I think tying it to a story, people don't give to need. They give to vision. Ed Young has said that for decades, Ed Young Jr. Has said, "People don't give to need. They give to vision." And so being able to share a story or a testimony doesn't need to be long. A 30 second or 60 second give moment where you say, "Hey, we were able to support the crisis pregnancy center in our community, and they just wanted to let you know that when you give it goes to blank." You know, just a quick little giving moment. There are those that do it a lot better than I can explain it. That's why I've asked them to teach on it at the conference, but it is important, and it is an act of worship. I think some of the pushback when people hear online giving, or boxes in the back, or not talking about giving is that it is an act of worship, and I agree with that. I agree it is an act of worship.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. I think it's an act of worship, but I also ... I feel pretty strongly about it. Just because we had to think about it so much. I think it's a pastoral act. In the same way that I want people to pray, in the same way that I want people to give, I really believe that when you, or sorry pray and read the bible, I really believe that when you start to give, that's when you see transformation. When people trust God financially, they're finally trusting God. So I want people to give even more than as a pastor I want the church to receive. I just think it's something I want for you, not something I want from you. And we've kept it, even though 80%, 70% of our giving is digital, we've kept it as a part of our service. And we found it to be really helpful. Because we do it very similarly to how you described it there. Like, "Hey, when you gave last week it enabled us to do this in Guatemala or enabled us to do this to the food bank."

Carey Nieuwhof:

People want to know that they're making a difference, and then I want to know that they're trusting God financially. Because I think when you trust God financially, you're finally trusting God. It gives new people a chance to step in and realize that they're surrounded by generous people. That's good.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Announcements. One thing I've heard is only ever announce things that apply to everyone. So you know if you're like, "Choir practice is Wednesday at 7:00," and you know, the blankety blank club meets at 7:00 on Thursday, basically how many announcements should you have? I mean Rich Birch and you should get together on this. Because he's talked more about announcements alone than I think about anybody has. But like, what would say? Are like five too many? Three too many? Two too many?

Greg Atkinson:

Well, you're not going to like my answer. Actually, I'm going to be on Rich's podcast the fourth time this year.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Awesome.

Greg Atkinson:

I think the first person to be on it four times. We have great conversations. I'm a big idea guy, and Dave Ferguson years ago wrote a book called The Big Idea. Andy Stanley talks about a big idea. I like one announcement.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's it.

Greg Atkinson:

Give them one thing to remember. And it should apply to the greater body. "Hey everybody, next Sunday we have a newcomer's this or this," or, "We have a picnic," or, "We have our group link. Sign up for small groups," but it needs to be big picture, big ... It needs to hit the broadest audience possible, but it needs to be one thing. My rationale behind that is one, I think it's wise. I think it's strategic, but two, if you give people 10 options, 10 things to do, you're going to overwhelm them, and they won't pick any. They just won't do any.

Greg Atkinson:

I also wrote an article last year for Pastors.com that got a lot of traction called Always Point People to the Website. And so I would say, "Here's one thing you need to know this week. We have our small group link Tuesday night. If you are interested in getting plugged into a small group, we'd love for you to check it out. For everything else going on at Connexus Church, check us out online," and then always point them to the website. You can have 10 announcements on the website. Just don't say 10 in person live, right in front of them.

Greg Atkinson:

Kim Meyer, years ago, Kim Meyer was communications director at Granger Church. She's a communications wiz. She said if everything's important then nothing is. If everything is important, then nothing is. You can't stand up and tell me 10 awesome things to do and expect me to rate them equally. Well, I've got to do all 10 because they're all 10, awesome. You just, you can't do that. So I give them one thing, and everything else go to gracechurch.org. You know, point them to the website.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. This has been so good. So let's ... Man, we're pushing the hour mark here. So here we are once again.

Greg Atkinson:

I do have something important I want to discuss.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Tell me. Okay, go ahead.

Greg Atkinson:

Okay. Because what it all leads up to is the response time, and then after that post-service followup and assimilation.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Let's talk about that.

Greg Atkinson:

The response time is something that you have got to think through. I've used the word intentional and strategic numerous times. You need to know, is this going to end in prayer? Is this going to end with an invitation to the gospel? Is this going to end with people rededicating their life? Are you going to ask people to raise their hands if they're making a decision? Are you going to do an alter call, ask people to come down? You have to think through everything. Plan that with your team. Talk through it. This week, we want to have our pastors down front to pray with people, or we want to have our prayer team down front, or we're going to ... I'm going to ask people to bow their head, close their eyes, and raise hands. I need you in the back helping me count hands. Or at Elevation, when they see the hands go up, they give them an orange bible. Elevation's colors are orange.

Greg Atkinson:

So when the hand shoots up, immediately there's a bible going into their hand. And then the congregation starts to clap all around them as people raise their hand, and then they get a bible. Then we tie that into, "Meet us at our next steps tent outside. We want to celebrate with you, and get you connected, and celebrate your decision." I will say, and this is touchy. It's kind of like asking me, "Should pastors stand behind the pulpit?" And we'll probably both get hate mail for this, but something that I have seen that is just like watching a trainwreck, it's horrible, and that is when you have an alter call in a small context or in a dead context where God's not moving, and the pastor is standing up front just waiting, and waiting, and waiting, and nobody's coming down. Nobody's moving. Nobody has come down the aisle in 20 years, but he's up there waiting just as I am singing just as I am or I surrender all week after week. It is just brutal to watch.

Greg Atkinson:

And so I do think you have to think through it and be strategic and intentional, and maybe there's a better way. You know, I taught a conference last year, and I talked with pastors about this of what if I told you that asking somebody to check a box on a connection card that said, "I made a decision to Christ," would lead to better followup, better assimilation, more baptisms, and more conversations than if you wait up front and expect people to walk an aisle. And they had to wrestle with that, and I got a lot of angry looks. Then it turned into tears where God kind of did something in their heart, and they realized, "You know what? Maybe we're doing this the wrong way. It worked for Billy Graham. It worked in a crusade environment, but this is 2018. This is a different day."

Greg Atkinson:

Now, if you're in a church of 15,000 people, and 100 comes down, it feels like a flood. It feels like God is moving. I did a consultation at First Baptist Dallas last year, and they had tons of people coming down and a prayer team down front. And it felt great. It felt great, but I've seen pastors of a small First Baptist visit First Baptist Dallas and then come home to a congregation of 100 people and do an alter call, and they just don't come down. It's just it can kill the morale of the congregation, and that wears on your people. Where they kind of roll their eyes and say, "Nobody ever comes down. Why does he do this?" And so there may be a better way-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Or it's the same three people every week.

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, or it's the same three people rededicating their life. But if you pray through this and think through this and just experiment ... Larry Osborne has said for years, when he talks about innovation, experimenting, taking risks, experimenting, calculated risks. If we were to just say hey one week, you've got a connection card. On there is a box that said, "I made a decision for Christ," or, "I want to talk with a pastor. If God moved in your life today, if you made a decision, if you crossed the line of faith, we would love for you to check that off, turn it in to the next steps desk at the back. We'd love to connect with you and give you a gift," or whatever your process is, but then throughout the week you can start your assimilation plan and your followup.

Greg Atkinson:

I used to, every week as a campus pastor, I would look and see all of the decisions for Christ. They actually, my team, would put those on top because they knew I was looking for that first. But they would put it on the top of the stack, and I would look through decision, decision, decision, decision, and that's who I followed up with, and we had a ton of baptisms. What happens is when the only way that somebody can move forward in their faith, and get baptized, and make a public declaration is to walk an aisle, then we wonder why we see churches that have not baptized somebody in 10 years.

Greg Atkinson:

I think we make the barrier of entry too hard, and there's probably a better, wiser way to do it. So I don't want to give all the answers. I just want to encourage you to pray through it and think through it. Is there a better way to accomplish the same goal?

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a good word. That's a really good word. This has been super, super helpful. So you know what I sense, and maybe just following in Rich's footsteps, that we've got to do part three at some point later this year about followup. Because I bet you've got a lot to say about that, too.

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So okay, this will be a threepart. How's that? Why don't we-

Carey Nieuwhof:

We spent the first 10 minutes getting onto the campus in episode 132. This episode we've talked about the one hour, or 90 minute, worship experience. And then next time we're going to talk about the post-followup and how that works. That's been really, really good. Wow. Greg, any final thoughts? And then tell us about something that you're doing for church leaders that they may be interested in getting on.

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, one final thought, because I know you have so many pastors and preachers that listen to your podcast. I don't remember who first said this, but it's always stuck with me. When you prepare your

sermon, when you prepare to teach, I think it should all end and build up to a "So what?" moment. So what? Why does this matter? What is it you want me to do with this message, with this last 30-45 minutes that I've heard you speak? So what?

Greg Atkinson:

And so as you prepare to teach, what is the so what? What is it you want the people to take away? What is it? And this all goes towards that intentional response. How am I wanting people to respond? Maybe it's a week where it was believer focused. And so there's not really an invitation. Maybe it's something where we're going to end in prayer or we're going to have a time of praying for healing or for this sick, but just thinking through "How do we want this to end?" and planning towards that end.

Greg Atkinson:

But yeah, thank you for letting me be a part of this and for letting me mention what we have going on. I have put together the first ever, first annual, First Impressions Conference, and you are gracious enough to be one of our featured speakers. We have some great pastors, and practitioners, and leaders, and thought leaders all across North America that are part of this conference. It's a three day online event. So, there's no travel, no hotel, no flight. You watch it online. Most people are actually signing up for the all access pass which means they can watch it at anytime. They can download and archive the videos.

Greg Atkinson:

We have sessions on preaching, assimilation, guest services, the give talk I mentioned, children's ministry, check-in, registration, all of that, communications, online presence, social media, website. Security and facilities, that session alone is worth the price of admission. We're going to dive deep into security with the nation's leading thought leaders on security, and then a panel on worship. We talked a lot today about worship. We have some amazing worship leaders from around North America that are going to be a part of this worship discussion, and so we're going to dive into ... It's basically everything that happens on a Sunday. So parking lot, children's ministry, first impressions, guest services, ushers, greeters, preaching, worship, you name it. If it happens on a Sunday, we're going to cover it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So we've done two and a half hours on that, and this conference will be three days. Where can they find it online?

Greg Atkinson:

just firstimpressionsconference.com.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And where can they find you online, Greg?

Greg Atkinson:

Yeah, I was going to say. A lot of people don't realize this. One, you can just look at my name. gregatkinson.com is my personal blog. @GregAtkinson on Instagram and Twitter, but I have a Facebook

group for weekend worship and guest services where there's thousands of us that just chat Sunday stuff, and we talk shop. If you go ... The simple way to find it is go to [guestservices.church](https://www.guestservices.church). So if you think of Guest Services Ministry, [guestservices.church](https://www.guestservices.church). That will land you on the Facebook group page.

Greg Atkinson:

And like I said, we have thousands of people, and there are communication directors, children's ministers, worship leaders, pastors, First Impressions team leaders, guest services staff. We just talk Sunday, and so ... And I mention that because that's where you can interact with me. I am active in the group each and every day. I'm commenting, posting, sharing, answering questions, and so in order to interact with me the most, that's where you'll find me: on Facebook.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well that's phenomenal. Greg, thank you so much. Once again, part one is episode 132 if you're listening to this and missed that one. And Greg, really appreciate your insights today. Thank you.

Greg Atkinson:

Thank you for having me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well shownotes, shownotes, shownotes. You guys are going to want more, and we've got the links to everything including some fun things that Greg's doing over at careynieuwhof.com/episode185 or just go to Lead Like Never Before, search Greg Atkinson. That will get you to both his first episode and this episode. So, I'm really excited for that. That first episode, by the way, was episode 132 if you just want to scroll back on your phone and listen to that one after finishing this one.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, we have some great guests coming up over the next little while. I'm pretty excited. I mean, we've lined up like, for later this year, Nancy Duarte. We've got Levi Lusko, Daniel Pink, Jon Tyson, Patrick Lencioni. Did I say Nancy Duarte as well? Pretty excited. Nick Vujicic and so many others. Clay Scroggins is back, and again subscribers you get that all for free, but coming up in the immediate pipeline, like next week, Daniel Im is on this podcast. He is going to talk about what's wrong with discipleship, finally, by vocational ministry and false maturity. It's a fascinating conversation. Every time I hang out with Daniel, I learn. Here's an excerpt.

Daniel Im:

Okay, so you really want to do and find a job that gives you mindspace, that gives you the headspace to be able to pray for your congregation, to pray through the message, to think through ... You know, to even have conversations with people in your church or do leadership development while driving. So a bad job, for example, would be starting your own company.

Daniel Im:

Now, I know a lot of bivocational guys or church planners that are like, "Well, obviously I want to do that." Because they're entrepreneurial, and they want to start something. But Carey, I mean, you know as well as I do the challenge of starting something new. Just the grind and how it consumes you, right?

Daniel Im:

So, if you are planting a church or serving as a bivocational pastor, your mindspace needs to be dedicated to your church, to sermon prep, to praying for your church, to strategizing, to do all that. So any sort of job that allows you to clock in and clock out and really leave it at the job is helpful.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yep.

Daniel Im:

Right? So that's traditionally one. So, I know a church planner who actually, he drove a garbage truck in California, and it was like 4:00AM to like 2:00PM workday. He'd go to bed at 8:00, but what was great for him is actually when he's done he was able to actually still have his day to connect with people, to do discipleship, leadership development. Now, his job has actually transformed into like an 8:00-5:00 one where he's not as rigorously collecting garbage. So now what he does is he actually just does a lot of leadership development and discipleship on the phone while driving.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So that's coming up next week. Subscribers, you get it automatically, and everybody gets it for free. So we are really looking forward to that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Hey, if you haven't headed over to trainedup.church yet, please do so. And use the coupon code Carey, C-A-R-E-Y, on checkout. Train church leaders the way everybody's doing it these days: online. They've got a plan that suits your budget, and you get 10% off for life and a 30 day money back guarantee. That's pretty sweet. Again, rethinkleadership.com, canadianchurchleaders.ca. If you want to hang out this year, that is your best opportunity to do so. We'll be pals. Those are going to be great events. And in the meantime, I really do hope whatever you're doing, whatever you're leading, that this 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.