

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 382 of the podcast. My name is Carey Nieuwhof, and I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before. We've got William Vanderbloemen on the podcast. He's back, and we have a wide-ranging conversation. As we look ahead to 2021, he's got some thoughts on why this'll be the year a lot of people will quit. Future staffing trends and lessons from Willow Creek. Today's episode is brought to you by Ministry Boost. You can get access to their new course, Volunteer Reboot, by going to ministryboost.org/carey. That's ministryboost.org/carey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I'm so excited to have William back. We had a really interesting conversation. He's been on a few times, and we do talk about succession and how that is changing. But we got into a really fun moment where... This one was sort of a fresh thought for me, but William thinks that 2021 is going to be the year where a lot of staff turn over. In other words, people you don't want to leave will leave. And I'm like, "What?" Anyway, it was a fascinating conversation, and it's just something else you could be ready for. See what you think of that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And we also talk about future church staffing trends, how to do succession well, and why it doesn't go well, why so many leaders hang on too long, and then lessons he learned leading the search at Willow Creek in Chicago. They just welcomed Dave Dummitt as their new lead pastor. And what can we learn from that? It's a pretty wide-ranging conversation, and it's fun. Actually, I'm going to talk about this in What I'm Thinking About. William and I have had numerous conversations this year, not all of which have obviously made it on this podcast. We don't always agree on things. We see things a little bit differently. We agree on all the fundamentals, but just we see things a little bit differently.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And one of the things we see a little bit differently is the future of digital. And so, hey, I always say to you on the podcast that I listen to ratings and reviews, and so thank you for that. And I was in the reviews again this week, and I just want to thank you for leaving one, and I hope you will. But I do read them, and someone said, okay, first of all, "A must-listen-to podcast." Thank you for that very much, Casey Ace. "Pick a favorite." It's impossible to pick a favorite. "Five stars. Must-have-podcast. Empowering," from Josh Crist. "Empowering, insightful, actionable." Thank you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But then there's somebody who didn't leave their full name, and sometimes I don't listen to people who don't leave their full name. But they made the argument that... And I'm hearing this, okay? I'm hearing this. It's like they gave me four stars. Thank you for that. "There's not another podcast that has the diverse group of leaders, but it would be a better podcast if I would not push, if Carey would not push digital so single-mindedly. Basically, the message is embrace digital or you're an idiot." And he says he's getting tired of that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So I'm going to address that. I'll address that at the end of the show. What about in-person attendance? What about in-person things? So I'm going to talk about that. I do think actually that in-person attendance is here to stay, but I think it's going to be different. So I'll talk about that at the end. And hey, just thanks for leaving feedback like that. I appreciate it. I do not think you're an idiot if you don't fully embrace digital, but I do think that things are changing very, very quickly. So would love to have that conversation in a little more detail at the end.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And today's episode is brought to you by Ministry Boost. My friends at Ministry Boost know that you want your staff to be effective leaders, especially in leading volunteers. And volunteers got disrupted this year, right, if you couldn't meet in person for a few months or now you're back, but it's different. So much has changed, and a lot of the staff are feeling stuck and discouraged. So Ministry Boost believes that church leaders should rethink our approach to leading volunteers in light of new opportunities online, volunteers who aren't ready to serve, and the different needs for what ministry currently looks like.

Carey Nieuwhof:

They know what it's like because they also... The leaders of Ministry Boost lead in the local church, just like you, which is why they're giving you free access to their brand new course, Volunteer Reboot. Volunteer Reboot includes six sessions on how to reboot your approach to volunteers so your ministry can thrive now. So how do you get access? You can go to ministryboost.org/carey. So just ministryboost.org/carey. Get access to their free course today.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So William Vanderbloemen is the founder and CEO of Vanderbloemen, an executive search firm serving Christian organizations with hiring and succession-planning services. He has a combined over 15 years of ministry experience as senior pastor with the best practices of executive search. And he does that for churches, not-for-profits, and for educational organizations. So excited to have William back. Let's not delay. We'll get into this pretty fascinating conversation. Then I'll come back at the end and talk about in-person attendance, online, et cetera, et cetera. So here we go. Well, William, welcome back to the podcast. It's just great to have you.

William Vanderbloemen:

Good to be here, my friend.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We have talked a lot this year back and forth, texting Big Green Egg stuff, all that. But you've done the reverse of what most people did. You look like you've dropped a few pounds during COVID. So tell us about that. Was this a journey to health for you, or what happened? Not that you needed to. Not that you needed to, William, but you look super fit.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. No, I probably did need to. I've always liked working out, and that's been good. But Carey, you get into this job, where I started this 12 years ago now, 12 and a half, something like that. And wow, I'm

going to Memphis. I've never been to Memphis. I've got to go to the place with the good ribs. Wow. I'm in Baltimore. They have crabs here. I need to go make sure I have a plate of that. And I gained a ton of weight the very first year out of the gate.

William Vanderbloemen:

And I always work out and try and be pretty careful, but when this COVID thing happened, Adrienne and I just looked at each other, and we were like, "This is going to go one way or the other. We're either going to gain the 19 or lose it." And I think the combination of not traveling, and she cooks really clean and doing a little more working out... I did hit one of those round-number birthdays last year. That probably kicked me in my butt a little bit and made me think-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Random trivia, well-researched on the internet, as all things are these days, but apparently if you look at people who run marathons, people whose birth year, like their age ends in nine are overrepresented. In other words, at 39, it's like, "Okay, well I'm in my 30s. I'm going to run this triathlon or this marathon or whatever." And I thought that was interesting. So of course, you turned 30 last year.

William Vanderbloemen:

Part of that is because at a round year... So I turned 50, and I should have gotten in shape at 49 because your time you run when you're 49 can count toward qualifying for Boston at the 50 age group.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh.

William Vanderbloemen:

So you get to count the times for qualifying. But I didn't do that, so I'm just-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, there you go. I didn't lose weight, but I didn't gain weight. So I figured that that was good. And then I hit some personal bests on Strava this year, so that was fun. More personal bests this year than in the last five years combined, so...

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, I'll tell you what. Weight aside, I have started to live out one of our core values a little bit more. One of our values at our company is ever-increasing agility. And I have said for years, the example is when I was in the early 40s, I was running, and I finally needed to start stretching, and so I'm sitting-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, yeah. It stinks, but it's true.

William Vanderbloemen:

Oh, it's terrible. And the stretching was more painful, and I sweat more during that than the run. And I remember trying to touch my toes one day. And our youngest, Macy, who was probably two or three at the time, she walked into the room, and she saw me just sweating trying to touch my toes. And she just

kind of sized me up, up and down, came beside me and, as only a toddler can do, tied herself in this human pretzel, and then stood up and looked at me again and laughed at me and left the room. Not one word said. And it dawned on me... This isn't in our question list. Sorry. But it dawned on me on that day, "Hey, William, every day I'm alive, I get less flexible."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yep.

William Vanderbloemen:

Biological fact. It's a company fact. It's a church fact. So I've said that and stretched some and all that. But back in January before COVID, I officially retired from the sport of banana boating. We were on a lake in a warm climate with some friends on a banana boat. And I was getting off, and a wave came in and pulled the boat up. And my leg went one way, and I pulled my hamstring. It's the first time I've been injured where I couldn't fix it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow!

William Vanderbloemen:

So I've been doing a lot of stretching and trying to do a little bit of yoga here and there. And that's not something that's helped with weight, but man, do I feel better being more flexible.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Isn't that great? Yeah. I finally got into stretching a few years ago. Not serious, but like, oh, on the days I do it, I feel a lot better. Speaking of... What is it? Ever-increasing agility is one of your company values?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So you and I were talking before we started recording. I mean, I've had to pivot. You've had to pivot. Everybody has done this. But what's that meant for Vanderbloemen and Associates? Like for your company, what does that mean when... Because you did rely on a lot of in-person searches, meetings, flying around the country, you and your whole team. So how did that hit you, and what did you do?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. Well, I mean, God is so good. He sees ahead, right? And we had been finally... So I'm a horrible manager. I mean, I'm really bad. The onboarding model when we were a younger company and fewer people, oh, here's how you learn how to do search: Follow William around for six months. That was it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Osmosis, right? Osmosis model of leadership. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

So now I've got people that are smart enough that they've built systems and strategies. And I guess the way you're supposed to say it is the way we do things can be taught and doesn't have to be caught.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right.

William Vanderbloemen:

Right?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right.

William Vanderbloemen:

So that's a beautiful spot. So all the way back, beginning of '18, we started putting in motion a plan to decentralize our offices. Not totally virtual, but to say, "All right, let's start setting up regional offices in areas of the country and the world where we do most of our work." So we started doing that. We started looking for a different... And we started setting up, all right, that means we're going to have to get used to doing a lot of virtual. We've done Zoom forever, but let's get really good at it. Let's build backdrops so that no matter where you are, it's going to look the same.

William Vanderbloemen:

So we had all these virtual backdrops, and we had Zoom cameras, and we were all ready to go. And then when COVID hit, it was like, "Wow. We thought we were doing this for one reason, and God was preparing us for another." And we pretty much just flipped the switch and went virtual during the lockdown period, I guess, from March... I guess we came back to the office in late July.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay.

William Vanderbloemen:

And we can go back to... If we had to go back to totally virtual, we could. And the way the numbers, as we're recording now, are going, maybe that's something that'll have to happen, but that doesn't really scare us. I think on a business front, one real outcome of the COVID incident is pivot is now a four-letter word at our office. We're so tired of hearing that word. Like, oh, give me a break. Can we find another word?

William Vanderbloemen:

But in seriousness, though, I don't know that we relied on in-person worship, but we did rely on people hiring, and most churches are doing pretty well, despite what ... Most churches that use us, despite what a lot of press would say, there's a lot more good news than bad. But people hunkered down. Like, "How's this going to go? What are we going to do? We're not really going to hire. I'm not really going to move right now." And it just kind of went into shutdown, and we knew that. And you and I've talked. We read that article that was just not really a great bedtime story that Andy Crouch wrote, Leading Beyond the Blizzard.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Ice Age. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

Oh, my gosh.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Winter blizzard. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

I read it right before bed. That was a bad idea.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So you didn't sleep well that night. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

No, not at all. But we did adopt the, okay, this is going to be a while. So we shored up cash. We took advantage of PPP loans the government was making. And then we said, "We're not going to be doing search for a little bit, so how can we serve churches so that, on the doomsday side, if we die, we die serving, right? And if we pull through this, then we will have served churches and done the right thing during a hard time, and God will smile on that."

William Vanderbloemen:

So we pivoted into helping churches with their PPP loans. We helped with a number of how do you get virtual? How do you reopen? We started enormous leadership content initiatives that went forward with schools, with nonprofits, with churches, and spent the summer doing that. Our January and our February were our best January and February ever in terms of new clients or searches or chances to serve. And then March was like off... March of 2020... I shouldn't say this out loud. March of 2020 was 96% worse than March of 2019.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow!

William Vanderbloemen:

That's pretty bad.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's bad. Yep.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's like if you-

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a bad month. Then you're not sleeping. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. If you brought in \$100, then the next March you brought in \$4. So it's a little bit different. And we don't have any debt. We don't have any investors. We've kept powder dry. So that's fine. This is why you have a rainy-day account. But we've been excited to see really since the summer, even with very slow and modest reopening of churches and schools, we're seeing real traction. And we're now seeing a better 2020 right now than we had this time in 2019.

William Vanderbloemen:

So I am very thankful for our team that has pitched in. We all did something right out of the gate. We had to restructure, and all of our lead team said, "Okay, we'll take a salary cut." I said, "No more pay for me for the year. Let's just do what we have to to pull through." And they've really done a great job. And on top of what our team has done, I'm very encouraged about where schools, nonprofits, and the church sit right now as we head toward '21.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. What would you... There was a lot there, but one of the questions that I have coming out of that is search has kind of resumed, and you're doing a few more Zoom interviews and virtual meetings than perhaps you did before. And these are early days. So we're recording this in November of 2020, but we've got six months under our belt in this disrupted world. Have you seen who churches or organizations are hiring shift? Like, is it the same positions that you've seen, or have you seen... I would think are there more digital positions open? What are the most in-demand positions heading into 2021 that you're seeing?

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, a lot has shifted and a lot has changed. And during this time where we couldn't really do search for a while, we went ahead and built some things that we've been meaning to do for a long time. What do they call it? Quadrant two time, that's not urgent, but it's super important. And one of those things, we built a sister company to help with staff support roles, because I think what we're going to see... So here's the big idea that I'd share with listeners right now. I'm telling business leaders, church leaders, school leaders everywhere, 2021 is going to be the year of turnover. It's just going to be, and we can unpack that if you want, but-

Carey Nieuwhof:

I do want to unpack that. Totally.

William Vanderbloemen:

If you think I'm wrong, then go ahead and fool yourself and say, "Well, this pandemic will only last two weeks." You were listening. You will lose someone next year that you don't see coming.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow!

William Vanderbloemen:

And I'm not just using that line to play into Carey's book, which is-

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, it's a great line, and thank you, TM. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

William Vanderbloemen:

You will. You will. I've got a pastor friend who says, "Every pastor should keep a vomit list." I'm like, "What is that?" He said, "It's a very short list of the two or three staff people that if they walked in at the end of the day and said, 'Can I have 10 minutes to visit with you?' which... "

Carey Nieuwhof:

Is never good. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

Right. "You'd just reach for the trash can and say, 'Let me throw up first.'" Well, here my prediction is there are going to be a lot of people reaching for the trash can this next year because turnover is coming.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay, let's unpack that. Why, how, what does that look like? Explain that.

William Vanderbloemen:

Right. Well, there's a few reasons, and we can get back to this other company as an outflow of that. But, well, for starters, people change jobs. That's just the way it is. I mean, every pastor is an interim pastor. Every business leader is an interim business leader. Every superintendent, an interim superintendent. And moving around is not a bad thing. If you read the gospels, it's hilarious to hear what Jesus got in trouble with with his own followers. And the most common complaint I can find where the guys are mad at him, it's like, "Dude, can you not sit still?" Because he says, "No, I've got to go from village to village. I've got to keep moving."

Carey Nieuwhof:

And they lose him. They can't find him.

William Vanderbloemen:

They lose him, and they can't... Where did he go?

Carey Nieuwhof:

"Can you not stay in one place for 20 minutes?" Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

Exactly. So that happens. So churn just happens, right? Well, guess what? In 2020, it didn't.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right. So there's latency in the system. There's a glut in the system.

William Vanderbloemen:

There's latency. It's like here's churn as a river, right? And 2020 just put a dam up. And people... Like, youth ministry, if you're a pastor listening, every pastor's had this happen. The Monday after Easter, the youth pastor walks in and says, "I'm leaving. I want to stay until graduation, until we sing Friends Are Friends Forever or whatever the new version of that is. And then I'm out." And you're off to the races. Well, none of that happened. Everybody's like, "I can't leave them now."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right. Or, "I can't even leave my city now."

William Vanderbloemen:

Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Or so much for that. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

Or another factor, "I'm not about to inject any extra uncertainty into my life right now." So you've got people stayed put out of loyalty. You've got people who didn't move because they didn't want to inject uncertainty into a totally uncertain year. You've also got a couple other things. It's interesting. We've had a few searches that we're doing right now that are a result of... In fact, one that we'll be starting tomorrow for a client where we had placed the worship pastor. He'd stayed five years. He's leaving. And they called us and said, "Hey, we want you to come do it again. This was great." "Well, why's he leaving?" "Well, this whole pandemic has made them realize they want to live near their family."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yes.

William Vanderbloemen:

And so you've got people bugging out for lots of different reasons. Like, "I want to go be near my family." "I didn't leave when I should have." Think about this. Have you ever had anybody on your staff, this happens in business or church, where you give them a sabbatical, right? And they go take sabbatical, or maybe you've heard of a friend that had a sabbatical. They come back from sabbatical. Within a year, they're gone from their job.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yep. Almost... There must be a percentage behind that because that is really high. It happens all the time.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, businesses are smarter than churches. They put golden handcuffs. If we're giving you the sabbatical, you're staying this long or you owe us money. Churches haven't gotten that shrewd yet. But why is that? Well, it's not a bad thing. We're creatures of habit. We get into a rut of doing things the same way all the time. Sabbaticals get us out of the rut, and we're able to look around, and we're able to

go to the mountain and be with the Lord and hear a fresh word or understand that life is short, and we want to get on with it. 2020 has been the longest sabbatical ever. Now, I know that pastors right now, leaders right now are saying, "It wasn't a sabbatical for me. I've been working my tail off." Yeah, but not in your normal routine.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yep.

William Vanderbloemen:

This has pulled everyone out of their normal routine for, you say five months. It has been a while, and it'll probably be a while. People are-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. I think people are looking at summer 2021 before there's any semblance. Now there's talk of a vaccine. Is that going to happen? But one of the stories that has happened here... I've not tracked this story as closely in the U.S. You're Houston based. I'm Toronto based. But there has been a geographic redistribution. So I live an hour north of Toronto, and housing prices here are through the roof because people are going, "I don't need to live downtown in a condo when I can have a 60-foot lot or a half acre here for less money. I'm going to move up here."

Carey Nieuwhof:

And so you see New York. I had Scott Harrison on the podcast earlier this year. He left Tribeca and went into rural Pennsylvania. And you see that as some of the tech companies decentralize. So is that going to be part of it too, where people are just like, "Yeah, we want to go live in the mountains. We don't have to live on the coast anymore"?

William Vanderbloemen:

Totally agree. We're doing some search work right now in Park City, Utah, and you can't get somebody in a home there. Like, there aren't homes because it's close enough to a good airport, but not in the middle of all the mess. And yeah, we're seeing it in Rye, New York, and in Greenwich, Connecticut, all the places that were where Don and Betty Draper would have lived, right? But then everybody millennial went into Tribeca or to Chelsea or someplace cool in New York, and now they're headed back out. So we could go with six or seven more really critical reasons, but I promise you, '21 is going to be the year of turnover.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, you're right.

William Vanderbloemen:

And so this year we've been preparing for that. There's going to be a storm surge. Hey, here's another factor. I cannot tell you how many guys and gals, but guys predominantly, who were thinking, "Sometime in the next five years, I'm going to talk about succession." Well, guess what? COVID accelerated it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

They say, "I don't want to reconstruct this." Right? Like-

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, you know what? Or, "I just didn't sign up for this, and they really need a digital native, and I'm not. And it's time to speed this up and get the next person in that can..." So there are just so many reasons why we foresee '21 as a year where there's going to be a lot of turnover, and some of it's going to be really painful. I mean, imagine your very best person walking in in the middle of COVID and saying, "William, I know we've been together nine years, but I want to start my own marketing company." Yeah, that happened. It happened to me. And it's Holly, who you know well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I do. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

And a lot of listeners probably do. And she's going to kill it. She's going to do a great job, and I'm cheering her on and so glad for the time we had with her, but-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, that was your vomit-bucket moment, right? Like, Holly's great.

William Vanderbloemen:

It was. She even brought it up when she called me. She said, "So, you know that vomit thing you talk about?" I'm like, "Yeah. Okay. I get it."

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'm triggering it.

William Vanderbloemen:

Nothing but great things to say about her. But I think the sitting still and all the disruption was a real catalyst in her heart for now's the time to get... Let's go ahead and do it. And if you're not getting ready for turnover, then you're going to be in for some surprises in the next year.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. It's really interesting. It's almost as... And at some point, it's not going to happen soon, but at some point the external disruption is going to normalize.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But then that will fuel a whole bunch of internal disruption-

William Vanderbloemen:

That's right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

... where people go, "Now I have permission to move. Now I have permission." And on the whole succession thing, it's interesting because I'm on year five of a five-year planned succession, where I'm off church staff at the end of 2020. But part of me, literally, as I'm wrapping up as we record this interview, I'm like, "I know this was all premeditated, and we worked on this and pre-planned, and the plan's gone beautifully," but I'm like, "Yeah, it is a weird time to leave."

Carey Nieuwhof:

And yet I was thinking if I was still the founding pastor at 55 in the lead pastor seat, I'd be thinking, "Am I really going to do this for the next five years? Maybe. Maybe I will. Maybe I won't." So it just raises questions that normal situations don't. Back to that question about an increase in jobs, do you find more organizations you serve, churches and not-for-profits and educational facilities, are they looking for tech people? Are they looking for online social media people? What are they looking for?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, well, you and I've had a friendly debate throughout this whole thing. I just-

Carey Nieuwhof:

It is a bit of a debate. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

It's great. I mean, I love it, but I am convinced in-person will not go away. I do think it's [crosstalk 00:25:53].

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, yeah, and I agree with that.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. I kid people all the time.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:26:04]

William Vanderbloemen:

I was talking to the Houston Chronicle yesterday, our newspaper, and they were asking about in-person versus not and why, and I say, "Hey, look, Christmas is coming." We really believe that Jesus came to earth in person for a reason. And we're told that in the Bible, that that was the fullness of time, right? So if this were the fullness of time, Jesus would have just Zoomed it in. But there's something about in-person that really matters. Now, what's different? Well, the in-person, person has to also be digitally native. I mean, the preacher has to be able to preach to a camera and to a room, right? The pastor... Why are people going to come back in person? It's not going to be because of our sermons, forget that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, content is everywhere. It's ubiquitous.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. It's going to be because they want to see friends, and they want to be around people. So that there's a need for digital natives that's coming. But there's also a need nobody's talking about this yet. There's a real need, I don't know if you're familiar with the old, there's a threefold office of Christ in the reform tradition and the ax-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Prophet, Priest, and King.

William Vanderbloemen:

Prophet, Priest, and King, and a lot of people talk about pastors in that role like the prophetic visionary gift, the kingly run the organization gift and the priestly take care of people gift. There's a huge surge coming in a need for people with a priestly gift.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

The other two are going to go out. You're going to be able to outsource a lot of running of things that used to not be able to be outsourced. The prophetic, yeah, it'd be great if you could preach well, but people can YouTube anything now, and they know it. So, like, the ability to really care for people and to hyper-contextualize your ministry around the postal code you're in not just the area of the country, that's going to be key. So a couple of different fronts, tech positions, yes. And think about education for a minute.

William Vanderbloemen:

In the United States, there's been a pretty raging debate. Like in seminary, I went to Princeton, it's still three years, residential only, you got to go to the ivory tower, you got to live there, which the average age of a seminary and now is like 35. So does that make sense to pick up a family? And along comes liberty that has done an amazing job with a lot of pure online degrees. Well, which one is right? And they've been fighting with each other forever. Well guess what? Now they both have to be both.

William Vanderbloemen:

And the Princeton guys can no longer just say ivory tower, they have to be able to do both. In the undergraduate world, Harvard's always said, "Well, we're Harvard, more Ivy league." And University of Phoenix is hilarious, they have a football stadium named after him and they don't have a football team. Like, they're totally virtual. Now people running the schools and seminaries have to be able to think both ways. So you see people like Al Mohler at Southern Seminary doing an amazing job because he's been beating the drum of digital forever and residential. It's like churches and schools and nonprofits are looking for dual citizens. It's not an either or, it's a can you be digitally native and still be so here in person and in the flesh? And that may not have gotten to the question that you asked.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, it's a great question. And on the priestly thing, the other place I have heard that, I did a two and a half hour interview with Gordon MacDonald, which was unbelievable.

William Vanderbloemen:

Isn't he the best?

Carey Nieuwhof:

He is the best, and one of his insights at turning 80, The View From 80, was that we need more priests and fewer preachers. And we just spent like 10 minutes on it, but that would be worth looking at that because there is like I always think nobody can out local the local church, right? Like you shouldn't be able like, yeah, maybe I can't compete with the best communicators in the world right now, but I got people around me that those communicators are not going to come and visit. So nobody should be able to out local the local church. So I see that on the other hand, everybody you want to reach is online and so it's that hybrid world, that digital world. And I agree with you, you know? This isn't a church trends episode, but one of the things I think is in-person isn't going away, it just won't always be in the facility. That maybe you're going to be gathering people in your homes and the church will equip you for that or the community.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, the old saying Billy Graham said, "The way I prepare for a message is I sit down at a table with Bible in one hand and a newspaper in another." Listen to me pastor, that's gold, sit down with a Bible in your hand and not a newspaper, your most local news. I've got a dear friend who is a pastor here in town, who's been worried since about April. "No one's ever going to come back to our church." "Well, why?" "Well, because they found they can listen to Steve Furtick now and they can listen to Matt Chandler and why would they come listen to me?" And I've just said, let's call him John. I said, "John, you know what you have that none of them have? You have a call to your local parish. So the local parish priest, the local parish parson, that's going to be so key."

William Vanderbloemen:

And if you think about it, it's been coming. I mean, we used to have giant malls and then it went to strip malls and now it's local farm to market tables. Well, the same thing's going to happen with talent. It's like, can you speak to here now in this small moment of our smallest part of the world? I just see it being a huge deal. And not just the preaching, but the showing up like paying the old school rent of actually doing hospital visits, whenever we're allowed to do that. I was listening to Tim Keller who, I mean, if there's one author that we will still read in a hundred years, if Jesus doesn't come back before then, he's our guy, he's our C. S. Lewis. And he feeds me every time I listened to him. He actually taught me preaching at Reform Seminary, preaching to the postmodern world.

William Vanderbloemen:

It was a great class. And he was telling a story of going back to his church that he served in Virginia before he moved to New York. He went there, I mean, he hadn't been there in 30 years, and they had him back and all these people showed up, and they were asked to share a memory of something that is still in their heart of Tim's time there. And he said it was just one of the nicest things anyone's ever done for him. It was amazing to hear the stories and as he heard the stories, he realized, "No one has said a word about my preaching." Like, so I just think that old school stuff is what people are going to be looking for in their talent, in the coming years and digitally native at the same time. Makes for a whole new kind of support staff. That's why we started this sister company, Christian Teams. I mean, in the US before the pandemic, most estimates that are read said about 10% of protestant churches were streaming their services weekly online.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

Now about 10% of protestant churches in the US are not.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Correct.

William Vanderbloemen:

So you, I mean, that's a massive move, right? So like having this guy from student ministries that's in 10th grade, as a reliable source for getting things streaming, that just doesn't happen. So these support staff roles that are not executive level, they're going to be huge and there's going to be a lot of turnover in those two. So we were like, "Okay, we're going to have to help if nothing else on the tech and the online streaming," which is not an executive search role. I mean, it's probably a \$40,000 role. So we built a whole new company and a whole new system to try and help that-

Carey Nieuwhof:

And that's Christian Teams.

William Vanderbloemen:

As christianteams.com, I know that sounds like a commercial. It is to some extent, but it is an answer to your question of what are we seeing coming out of this that's going to be a new reality? And I think turnover in general, but not just at the top level, also at this support level. And if the top is the head of an organization, the support staff is the spine, and you can't get by without it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. I'm curious, and we do see things a little bit differently, which is one of the things that makes our friendship so much fun and interesting and so many common interests cycling and Big Green Egg and all that stuff. But, I've been thinking about this a lot. One of the last things I did when I was lead pastor at Connexus was lead the building project. And then one of my first things in my founding teaching role was we launched online in 2016. And we had a good online presence, but like most churches, it was like, and other duties when it came to the service programming person, it's like, "Yeah, just make sure that whole like website and the stream happens and the YouTube thing gets built," and all that. So it was good. We would have hundreds or thousands of views, but not what we have today.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And so we were kind of ready when the pandemic hit, because it was, "Okay, we can't meet in person, but we do have this investment in gear," and yeah, we needed some upgrades, but it was a pretty easy switch. But I'm thinking, and then these days I run a virtual company and have for five years, in the podcast and the communications company. But I'm thinking, from a staffing perspective, I wouldn't be surprised if you see a lot of churches, like I'm looking for percentage of what you think growing thriving churches will be pumping into digital. In other words, rather than the, "And other duties as may be assigned," line in your creative guy's profile or the student pastors profile, could you see 20% of church

staffing going into online support 40, 50? Like any thoughts on that? Where do you think that might land in a few years?

William Vanderbloemen:

I'd love to give you the quotable number that you can tweet and make lovely. I don't know the number, it'll be a bajillion times more than it is now. There that's not there. You can tweak that-

Carey Nieuwhof:

A bajillion times.

William Vanderbloemen:

A bajillion times. Yeah and I'll tell you what, I'm already seeing it. Even in larger churches that were already ready like yours, instead of getting asked to do a worship, pastor or a production person like Nancy Beach used to be at Willow. Like now it's like, "No, actually the person above them now is the communication director."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right.

William Vanderbloemen:

The worship pastor is now going to report to, and I've said this for years, the chief communications officer is the growing edge of the C-suite in nonprofits, schools, churches, you name it, that communication piece. If we've learned anything through this pandemic, you've got to communicate and over communicate and over-communicate and you got to do it through so many different channels. So I'm already seeing that, so that's total bajillion. And then I'm seeing churches like my mother's church, and she doesn't like it when I refer to I'm from North Carolina, I'm from western North Carolina and really beautiful lovely part of the town in case my mother's listening, it's a wonderful setting, but it's pretty deep in the woods. And it's near where they filmed Deliverance. So, no lie. Oh, great people, good culture, sorry, mom. But it is what it is. And so she's got a brand new pastor who started like in January, poor guy.

Carey Nieuwhof:

"I've had a meltdown. Here's your job description."

William Vanderbloemen:

I've had him on my podcast twice now. He's, wonderful. But man, he just walked into a mess. And I've just said so many times this year, if John had come to his board of elders and said, "I've got a brilliant idea, why don't we stream all of our services online every week from now on?" They would have laughed him out of the room.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yep.

William Vanderbloemen:

They would have said, "Forget it." And when you ask him what he did with the pandemic. Well, that's what we did. "Well, how'd you do that?" "Well, my wife has a camera, and my kids held the mic." It is so duct tape, paperclips right now. And now churches are waking up saying, "Okay, this is not going away, even when life is normal, this is not going away." Whether the digital serves the in-person or the other way around, they're both going to be there. It's like our friend Craig Groeschel says, "I'm putting all my eggs in both baskets."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yes, yeah, we've had that conversation and he's like, "We're going 100% on digital and 100% on in-person and..."

William Vanderbloemen:

Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And I mean, resources like Life Church, of course you can do that, which is great. I think that's amazing. But like, I can almost... Can you see a world? because I'm thinking about this, like there was sort of the lead pastor who was also the lead communicator and now the communication thing, because it's so complicated with multiple inboxes and streams and social, you have a communication person. But I can almost see digital arts being over worship arts or creative arts, where that digital thing, where the weekend experience becomes an expression of your ministry, but it isn't the ministry. Do you see it differently? Do you see it the same way?

William Vanderbloemen:

Oh, absolutely the same way in a large church like yours or your former church or whenever this airs.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We're not leaving, I'm just not getting paid anymore. So.

William Vanderbloemen:

Carey, here's the news, they're going to see you as former, sorry.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. I know.

William Vanderbloemen:

Its succession.

Carey Nieuwhof:

One of my mentors has said, "Listen, and they forget you pretty fast."

William Vanderbloemen:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

He is right.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

He is right.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yes.

William Vanderbloemen:

And it's place knows it no more. Isn't that right word we're old. Yeah. So on a large church scale like Connexus, I think you're going to see the executive team changed drastically.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

I think the worship pastor being in the room may be because you don't want to cut them out, but there'll be a new add. It'll be the IT director, it'll be the chief communications officer. On a scale of my mother's church, where they have a couple hundred people on which is still a big church in the US but a couple of hundred people on the weekend. You're going to see, you might not see a full time tech person, you might see that \$40,000 higher, but what I think you will see is when we add that associate pastor who really is other duties is necessary. One of the lead indicators of core competency is going to be digitally native, can they oversee the outsource labor that we have, and make sure that all these high schoolers we're paying, or one-offs that we're contracting to are actually following consistent to our belief system and our messaging and our... So it's just going to hit every church everywhere. It'll manifest itself based on size of staff and such, but yeah, totally agree with you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. And I'm thinking about that even at the church and then where we still go there, it's still, our church, its been a great relationship, but I'm thinking this on my team too. So I tend to work with leaders who are decades younger than me, and there is a digital native component to that. Do you think that some of the church staff, because most Barna's stats, your stats, I saw it in your latest edition of next year's succession book, the average pastors, 57 ish. So I am still younger than the average pastor, but I'm not a digital native, I have a long pre-digital memory. I remember what it's like to be a teenager and not have a phone or have to get up and change the channels rather than have a remote. Like, I remember all that stuff. And I think the church probably skews a little bit older in staff. I have always hired younger, and I find that even if your job isn't digital, it's just not hard for them. And, do you think that we will end up with a younger staff moving forward just because of the digital native component to it?

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, one great hope I have for this. And I am chronically looking for silver linings in the middle of a very dark black optimist.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You are an optimist.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. So, I mean, this glass is going to stay half full, no matter how much I drink out of it. But, one of my great hopes and beliefs is, the church has been everybody's, what's the famous line, I mean, we have a diversity practice and we keep saying the church has the most segregated place in America is 11:00 AM on Sunday.

Carey Nieuwhof:

11:00 AM on Sunday, yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

Right. I think Dr. King, might've been first person to say it, but it's not just race. It's demographic too it's age. And I'd like to think that the skinny jean people and the still wear a coat and tie people will actually be forced to have to co-exist a little bit more because of a pandemic. I mean, I don't know how to do this, cross mentor me or make this work. "All I know is a legal pad. Help me be digital." And then digital people are going to be craving more permanence than they had before 2020. So I'm hopeful that there'll be some more co-mingling of generations in churches. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, that would be a good thing. And I would just say to our leaders, like older Gen X or Boomers, and I mean, I've got the iPhone 12 and the whole deal. So it's not like I'm and you too, William, you like have all the latest gear and that kind of thing, but there's a difference when you started using it when you're 10 than when you started using it when you're 30. There's just, there's a wiring, there's an innate mindset. We're going to go a lot harder on video in 2021. And I'm like, there, my team is telling me, "So we're going to create a channel and we're going to do this and you can create a show." And I'm like, "What does that involve?" And they're like, "Don't even worry about it. Just get in front of the camera, film something, and we'll take care of it."

Carey Nieuwhof:

And I think you'll see a lot more of that in church. Let's talk about succession a little bit. This is something I've been really passionate about. It's why I went early, rather than later. I stepped out at 50, which a lot of people were like, "Wow, that's early, that's young." Glad I did it. I think it was the right move for the church, the right move for me. Are we running into a place where that is going to be even more of a crisis moving forward? Or do you see that situation getting better? What's your take on succession in the church? And I would say for business leaders too, I think this is actual statistics from like Harvard studies, but like 95% of all businesses don't really have a meaningful succession plan. Like it's not like businesses have done this better systematically than churches. This is a human problem.

William Vanderbloemen:

Right. Well, there's a whole lot there to unpack, Carey. I think when I sat down with Warren Bird six and a half years ago to frame out a book on pastoral succession, after my mother called me saying, "You're going to do what?" I mean, she thought she was going to have to buy all 20 copies of the book. My whole goal in writing that book was to say, "Hey, let's change this from a dirty conversation we can't have to one that we can actually... Let's move from the parking lot to the boardroom." Like let's actually, and that's happening. So there is a conversation happening now. That is so encouraging to me. I've been asked to come into some rooms that I would never have been asked to come into before to say, "How are we going to talk about succession?" And people, there's a saying in the Catholic church, "The only sick Pope is a dead Pope."

William Vanderbloemen:

We just don't talk about transition, you're not going to do that. And here we are, after the book came out, there was a pastoral succession with a living Pope in Rome, that's amazing. So the conversation's happening. COVID has accelerated it. And where I see this taking root, now the largest companies in the US almost always have to have a succession plan. There's a, there's actually congressional acts for publicly traded companies that you must do this. But the reality is most of American businesses are not corporate-

Carey Nieuwhof:

They are not publicly traded. They're like the small five, six figures, small seven figure businesses that are privately annulled.

William Vanderbloemen:

And I'll tell you what we're focusing on so much right now is how do you do succession in a family business? Because that's where most businesses are.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

And what does that actually look like? And I'll tell you what, within parts of the church, it's the same thing.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yes.

William Vanderbloemen:

Particularly my friends that are in the...They are more spirit-filled or charismatic, I guess it's just almost a given that it's kind of a family business, and it's going to go from the father to the son. Well, the chance of a business going from one generation to the next or a church or a school, or what have you very, very slim that it works. You get to third generation, it's like 10%. You had the fifth generation, like Smucker's is a fifth generation family run company. It's publicly traded now. There's no research.

William Vanderbloemen:

The only other company that is out there is Nordstrom. And so, it doesn't matter where you are, there's a need for this conversation to get real and to study what does this look like. COVID I think has accelerated some people's plans about succession. Whether it's, "I'm not digitally native." Or, "Life's too short. I want to do something else. Or, "I've been putting this off and okay, let's go ahead and do it." Or, "The world is changing. It's not going back to normal, and I didn't sign up for this." There's an acceleration that's happened with succession. God has such a sense of humor. We did an updated and expanded version of our book is called Next: Pastoral Succession That Works.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's hefty, man. It's weighty, it's a real book.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, well, yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Lots of research.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, well, and I think we had 500 case studies, 200 in-depth the first round, and then went through five or six printings. I mean, this is not like a book you'd write. This is a sup— They call it a micro-niche book. Right. But it blew through every expectation for sales so they said, "Would you come back and do another version of this with some new research?" So, we put 150 new pages of research in there, and what we're finding is the conversation's happening, it's going to happen quicker and it's going to be more urgent than ever before. So some of that, not to go too long with an answer, some of that is because there will be a talent shortage. And that has nothing to do, I did not just call young pastors untalented, that's not okay. So here's what I mean. Let's do a chart, okay. Lots of available candidates, no available candidates, right? Lots, none. Let's talk about age going this way, Baby Boomers, Millennials, okay. There are lots of Baby Boomers that are about to retire. They're not many people that are 35 to 55 to take over.

William Vanderbloemen:

There are lots of Millennials that are under 35 ready to work, but most churches are not going to hand a senior pastor it over to somebody under 35. They're just not going to do it. So whether it's a church or a business or a nonprofit or a school, you're probably if you're looking at a succession where we're talking about retirement, you're probably looking at getting in a knife fight with five of your friends over who gets the 40 year old. I mean, that's just, that is the way it's going to go. Now, the other piece that I would say, we wrote to two people when we wrote the book. One is the average mega church pastor is like 61 or 62 right now in the US. So, it's a little bit older, and that's primary audience. Okay, this is on the horizon, really interesting. We're starting to get organizations hire us for a 10 year succession consultation.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

William Vanderbloemen:

"We are not going to talk about this now because Carey is turning 45, and he's going to be done when he's..." It's a 10 year conversation. The second audience we were writing to is the pastor who is 30, who may only stay at his place eight, 10 years, mean career change. This studying Millennials and Gen Z, like staying in one spot long enough to get the gold watch or whatever churches give out. It's just not happening anymore. So it's not just a retirement conversation, it's a legacy conversation, no matter what stage of the career you're in.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow, and I'd love to know, because I feel like this is a question, as a pastor I always get asked, "If God is so good why is there suffering?" And I feel like you could have just preached your best 40 minute message on that ever, and someone would greet you at the door and go, "Well that was great but yeah, honestly William, if God is so good why is there suffering?" Right? It's like the inexhaustible question. So one of the questions that I do have that feels inexhaustible is why do so? Because I talk to a lot of young leaders like you do and it's like, it is hard to have the conversation, this guy is holding on, he's been phoning it in for five years or 10 years. Why do so many leaders not saying all, but why do so many leaders hang on for so long, William?

William Vanderbloemen:

If I knew the answer to that, I'd write a book about it Carey. I got it, I got a couple of hypotheses or guesses. One is we're pretty far or moved from this illustration so a lot of people won't understand it, but I call this hanging on too long thing the Brett Favre syndrome. If you follow football in the US, Brett Favre, one of the most decorated quarterbacks ever. He stayed too long, and he kept bouncing from team to team.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Two seasons too long.

William Vanderbloemen:

Oh yeah, and you go, "Why is that?"

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:52:04]

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, okay, whatever God put in Brett Favre that allowed him to stand in the pocket while giant men are running at him that want to tear his head off, and stand there and make decisions, and believe in himself and believe he could do it and zip the ball down the field and lead a team while all that's going on, that's amazing. Who has that kind of gifting? The flip side to that? Every weakness is just a shadow side of your greatest strengths. And the shadow side of that strength is the voice that whispers in Brett's ear saying, "You can do it one more year." So, all right, what's the number one fear in the world that humans have? It's public speaking. Like, over and over and over. And Jerry Seinfeld is the one who said, "People would rather be the subject of a funeral than the speaker at the funeral."

William Vanderbloemen:

So what is it that God puts in a woman or a man that allows them, not just to publicly speak, but to do it every week and not just to do a speech every week, but to say, "Here's what the creator of the universe

says about your life?" What is that, that God puts in that person? Well, I can tell you what the shadow side is. The shadow side is the part that says, "You can stay one more year."

William Vanderbloemen:

And I had a friend, Carey, who... The church I pastored here in Houston had a whole lot of corporate leaders, and I remember one guy who came in my office one day. His name was Doug, and he was a COO of a very large company and he was considering moving to a CEO role of another company and he wanted my advice. I'm like, "I'm 31, 32 what do you want?" But I thought I knew everything. So it was fine. And I said, "What are you concerned about?"

William Vanderbloemen:

And he said, "William, have you never heard the old saying the first day you're the CEO is the last day you hear the truth?" And I'm still wrapping my mind around that and I still have to remind myself every day. My staff might tell me I'm doing a great job, but they're not telling me the truth.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Because you can hire them. You can fire them.

William Vanderbloemen:

They're just not going to [crosstalk 00:54:09].

Carey Nieuwhof:

You hold all the power.

William Vanderbloemen:

They might even think they're telling me the truth but they're not. "So pastor you did so good this Sunday. Man, the church is doing well." And you can hear that and not even realize people are not telling you the truth. I think it's why succession for the priesthood is the only time retirement is mentioned in the Bible and it's mandated. It's got to happen.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Do you think some of it is financial as well? That I just need to work because they opted out of social security and like, "Listen, I get it but William, I just need five more years, man then I can retire." What would you say to that leader?

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, I'd say you're not alone. You're not alone at all. And I have worked with some of the largest, most successful churches in the country and you'd be shocked how closely the pastor lives hand to mouth.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right. Despite all stereotypes.

William Vanderbloemen:

And Carey, we could spend hours unpacking why, that's not pastors are bad managers. There's just a lot of reasons underneath that. Okay. But it's a reality. So you're not alone if that's where you are. Secondly, if you're honest with your church, they'll fix it. I promise you they will. I can't tell you the number of times in the last three years that I've sat down with the board and I'm like, "To make this right, you're going to need to pay Carey this on an accelerated basis so that we can get the succession done." And you know what those business leaders look at me and say? They say, "Absolutely." And I have-

Carey Nieuwhof:

They don't hesitate, right?

William Vanderbloemen:

And it's not because they love you. Maybe they love you. That's great.

Carey Nieuwhof:

They just want you out. They know what's best for-

William Vanderbloemen:

No, no.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No?

William Vanderbloemen:

No, that's not it. No. The most expensive thing you can do in a succession is screw it up. That's like it. Look at the churches that have just gone shoo, they were the biggest church and they have bad succession and they lose revenue and they lose vision and they lose people and they lose and they lose, lose, lose. And they lose time and momentum. And I have it in my hip pocket to say to the board, "I know it sounds like a lot of money to pay in deferred compensation, but it's less expensive than..." I don't even have to finish the sentence. The business women and men in the room say, "It's less expensive and it's going bad."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. And that's not a retirement issue. That's a money issue. And that's what when leaders ask me, I'm like, "That's just something you handle financially." And the pastor's probably relieved along the way.

William Vanderbloemen:

Carey, if you're listening to this and you're a 35 year old pastor, y'all are doing budgets right now, probably even if you don't say y'all wherever you're listening. And I would encourage you when they say, "Is there anything we could do for you that we're not doing now?" Ask them to give you an expense account expressly for financial planning. Now church might come back and say, "Oh, we have three financial planners in the church that would look..." No, no. Pastors don't want to share all that. But if you're a board member and your listening, you want to help your head of school, you want to help you're CEO of a nonprofit, you want to help your pastor, provide for them, whatever it would cost to have good financial planning early on so that they can lock into a good plan. Because, Ben Franklin's right, the greatest secret in the world is compound interest. Get started early and you're fine. And

churches would fall all over themselves to spend the \$3,000 to \$5,000 a year that it would take to have really good financial planning and save them the more expensive conversation later.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How much of it is identity? How much of it is, "All my best days are behind me."

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. Well, I hear two very different things when you say that. Having been a pastor, and then a former pastor, and rather suddenly, I was shocked how empty I felt when people didn't need me or call me or want me to be important in their life. It consumes you. And I'm not like my dad, wasn't a preacher, my granddad, wasn't a preacher. It's not like, this is the family thing and it's gone. I was the weird one. When I told my family I was just going to go into ministry, my grandmother said, we were at a big family dinner and she said, "Oh good. Now we've got one to get us all in." So-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Awesome, grandma.

William Vanderbloemen:

Right? Exactly. So this is not like the family business that I gave up, but I don't know of another job on the planet, except maybe being like a head of state that consumes your identity. It's where you do your life. It's where you do your spiritual life. It's where you do your relationships. It's where your kids grow up. It's where your kids get married. It's where you bury your friends. And when you walk away, you walk away from a lot. And oh, by the way, they don't call you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, you think it's because of who you are, but it turned out to be because of what you do to a large extent.

William Vanderbloemen:

I don't know if you, you're the interviewer here, not me, but I don't know if you've experienced this, but I had a lot of leaders in this church I was in and one of them was a guy, Lloyd Benson. He was a senator here in the-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh yeah, I know that name. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. He ran for vice president when Dukakis ran against Bush, and Bush had Dan Quayle and his famous line was, "I knew Jack Kennedy, and you're no Jack Kennedy." So anyway, Lloyd was in our church and he had a stroke and was not able to communicate much, but his wife asked me to be the chaplain under the seat, US Senate for a day. It's an honorary thing that you go do. And so I went to do it and my host was a guy named Tom Daschle who used to be the Senate majority leader. And from one of the Dakotas, I don't even remember which one, but the November after I was there, he lost reelection just out of the blue. I don't know how you lose an election in Dakotas. You just call everyone there. Right?

William Vanderbloemen:

But anyway, he lost and I called Ms. Benson, and I said, "Ms. Benson, what's the best way to write him a note saying, "So, sorry." She said, "I'll just give you his home phone number." I said, "I'm not calling Senator Daschle at home." And she said, "Oh, William, you have no idea how little the phone rings once you're not in office."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

William Vanderbloemen:

Like, that's what's going to happen, pastor. And it is part of the reason people wait too long. I'd say the three biggest reasons succession have failed up till now is in maybe no particular order. Is finances, a lack of a calling to something else. So you're giving up your whole identity and you don't have anything to backfill with. The priests in the Old Testament retired from carrying stuff around the desert, but they had new priestly duties. Right? So, and then the third is the whole family is uprooted. Like, you got five family members on staff, and they're not ready to give up. Or, the spouse is not ready to give up that role. And man, those three things, if you could focus on those three things and be ready in those three areas, you're going to be ahead of 95% of the whole field.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. I would just vouch for that. Honestly, as someone who went a little bit early, everything you're saying completely resonates. And the mentors who have coached me, I got a lot of coaching and counseling in the early days of the succession. But even over the last year, I started to feel it in my heart and in my gut, like, "Oh, this is the end. Here it comes." And it was a bit emotional for a week or two and called a couple of friends and, and they just said, "They forget you fast, and don't screw this up. It's gone really, really well. Don't, don't sabotage it, don't wreck it." And it's been going great. But yeah, that whole idea of, you give your whole life to something and then you realize, "Oh, that was the position..." Some of it was definitely hard, and we've gotten some nice notes, but and then what am I going to do with my days? Right?

Carey Nieuwhof:

And so I have the privilege of being able to do this and I love it. And I feel like it's call on the whole deal. But I think a lot of us who are made to work and I feel that way, like this kind of my retirement, I love doing this, and I enjoy it. And I get up with a spring in my step. But it's a bigger part of your identity, and I think I'll be disentangling that for a while to come. So I just want to say, I hear about that-

William Vanderbloemen:

15 years later, I still am.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Are you?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How does that show up? How does that show up at this point, William?

William Vanderbloemen:

You ask me a question. I take 20 minutes to answer. It could have been a sermon. I do get the chance to pastor to pastors. So there's the priestly part still gets to come out. But I'd say Carey, I think the hardest decision Adrienne and I have had in our entire marriage has been where are we going to go to church? I turned into a snob. I'm not going to go to my former church. In the Presbyterian world, that just doesn't work. But it's not like where you are, where it makes total sense for you to be at Connexus.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, but it's weird when you're not in on the meetings anymore, and you're not up on stage and you're not, like it's weird and you're sitting there going, "This doesn't feel like my spot." But it is.

William Vanderbloemen:

Adrienne told me when we landed at the church that we're at and we love, she said she knew it was getting better because I wasn't sitting rewriting the sermon for the pastor while he was giving it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yes, I may have done that from time to time. No, it's hard. I think-

William Vanderbloemen:

It's turning to a snob, "Why don't they do it this way? Why don't they? They're missing that?" Yeah. That's how it shows up now.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But I don't know how Andy says it. Andy always says it so well, Andy Stanley, but he's like, "It kind of wrecks you because you're listening at church rather than listening to the preacher. You're listening at the sermon rather than listening to the sermon." And it is very hard to suspend, curiosity. "Why did he do the intro that way?" I really want to know, or it's like, "I wouldn't have done it. Why didn't you start with a story?" And then you get into that critical space in your head. And you're like, "Oh, this is not good. Now I need to go to confession somewhere. Something I don't know."

William Vanderbloemen:

That's exactly what I was doing. And that's why I just started rewriting the sermon for him. Just gave me something to do.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's like, "You can have this for free. Okay? Normally I would charge, but you can have this for free." Yeah, no, it is a weird disentangling. I think it's some kind of spiritual discipline. How would you know, I've done a lot of thinking on this and I'd love to pick your brain, but signs it's time to go? There is someone listening to this who goes, "But no, William, I have one more season left in me." And then there were others who are like, "No, I get it. I should have been gone four years ago, last year, two years ago. But it's money. It's identity. It's I don't know how to have the conversation." Any signs that you've

looked for in your own life or things you've seen in your work or your research that's like, "Yeah, that's a good time to go." When you see these things popping up.

William Vanderbloemen:

I think a couple of the signs that I'm seeing around. So if you ask the question, we did this through research. When does God usually put his hand on a pastor for growth? At what age? Right? So we took, and this is a very small sample group, there's probably a lot larger, but churches that had the same pastor for a long period of time that had some modicum of growth over a sustained period of time. So what were the growth rates and how old was the pastor during those growth rates? So is there a time and if you show me a church that's had the same pastor for a while and show me their growth rate, I can show you exactly where the pastor's 40th birthday is, because things spike. And if you're sitting there saying, "I'm 33 and I got to get going, I'm not getting enough done." You're not even at the start line yet.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So things spike at 40. Tell me more.

William Vanderbloemen:

Absolutely. Now, there are some outliers, Steve Furtick gotten quite a bit done before 40.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, he's done okay.

William Vanderbloemen:

He's doing all right. Although I think he is now in that power generation, but I think he did cross over the river into the forties. But I don't know if it's because in Texas we would say by the time you... When I went to First Pres Houston at 31, I got so much wrong, I didn't know how far I was over my head, and I tell people, "The one thing I really had going for me was I knew everything." Right? At 31, I could identify now, I wouldn't have even been able to identify with it then, but my very favorite Ted Turner quote, I think I've told this to you before. He said, "If I had a little more humility, I'd be perfect."

Carey Nieuwhof:

And that was 30 year old William?

William Vanderbloemen:

That was it. And by the time you're at 40, in Texas, you'd say, "I've gotten knocked off my horse enough now that I know what I don't know." So there's something that happens at 40 that causes growth. Now, show me the same chart, I'll show you where the 40th birthday is. I can also show you another line that's either their 55th or 60th birthday.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And what line is that?

William Vanderbloemen:

Where it flattens and starts to decline. Maybe it's 65 and there are outliers and young here in town is 83, still taking two steps at a time when he goes up the stairs. Still preaching live, he's amazing. So there are outliers, right? But, but the really unfortunate thing is that unlike the hockey stick at 40, it's not a hockey stick back down at 60, it's just a slow-

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's just a flattening and a slow decline.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, I think you said the words, mailing it in. I'm turning your question a little bit, but how do you prevent that? Well, when you're growing, go ahead and set key indicators. Go set key indicators for it. Now I know it's time and don't bail and say, "Well people don't come to church as frequently as they used to."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Don't blame the culture.

William Vanderbloemen:

Correct. You pay attention to those things. But I would say, so I never got to 60 as a pastor, so I don't have personal experience to bank on. But guys that I talked to, there's 60, I talked to one today. Yeah. 62 in great shape, huge church, and he's done. And he said what so many said, he said, "I still like preaching. It's all the other crap that's making me so tired." Or another pastor that said, "Do you know how many board meetings I have till I turn 65? Cause I do."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Like the person who tells you how many days until their retirement, someone's pension, right, or whatever. It's like, "Yeah. I have 3,218 days till I'm done."

William Vanderbloemen:

You know, I used to think I was going to be a PhD, because I didn't want to be a pastor. I wanted a respectable job. I thought pastors had bad hair and ask people for money. I grew up around Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker was my backyard growing up. So like the PTL club. I'll go be a professor. And then I realized professors only teach students about four hours out of the whole week. And the rest of it is being in the library and reading what got. I hate that stuff. I can't stand sitting still, but flip it to the pastorate. Your preaching is only this much of your time. When you start to lose joy in the daily grind of ministry. And I don't mean it got hard, cause I know it's the hardest job. I've had it. But when you really start to lose joy, and you don't gain any energy from it, that's a clear warning sign that it is time to start mailing it in.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I would agree with that. I would say in my late forties, I started to notice, "Okay, some of the stuff that used to energize me doesn't energize me. And some of the things I used to be excited about don't excite me." And it was too many meetings and too much this and the part of the job I still liked was preaching. And I went, "I think if you extrapolate this seven to 10 years, this is where you end up with that plateau and decline and the phoning it in." And I'm like, "I'm going to hand this off." And the year I finished, we

had double digit growth. It was great. So we went out on a high, but I can totally relate to that. And sometimes like what I'm doing now, I still wake up pretty much delirious every morning that I get to do what I do. So that's a great feeling.

William Vanderbloemen:

And, and things shift and change. You're in a church that's been the same forever, and you're just doing a faithful job tending to the flock. You're going to have a nicer place in heaven than Carey and I do, I promise.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Truth.

William Vanderbloemen:

You're on the front lines, you're doing the real deal. It does not have to be grow, grow, grow. When you start getting worn out by the daily grind, that's a good sign. For some people, the ministry grows and your job changes. There are lots of people that when they're 50, they don't want to keep doing the same things and they shouldn't. Their job should change. You don't have to be first in the office, last out. Or retire. It's not one or the other. You can find ways to get more done with fewer hours. I'm not at all saying once you quit wanting to be a workaholic, which I think most overachievers are in their thirties, that's not it. It's more of, is this draining you more than it's feeding you?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, because at the end of the day, if you're drained, it's going to show up. It's going to show up in your leadership. It's going to show up in realizing your mission. What do you say, you've got sections in your book on this, because there are also leaders listening who are like, "Great. I just hope the senior pastor, my boss listens to this." And he probably won't or she probably won't. How do I have the conversation with somebody who doesn't want to have the conversation, William?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. That's really, really hard. Yeah. And if you're a subordinate staff, I don't know that you get to.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So may not be your role.

William Vanderbloemen:

May not be your role. And it's certainly not your role to go talk to the board about it so they can do something about it. There's a word for that. It's called Absalom. I'm serious. What King in the Bible should have hung it up sooner than he did? How about Saul? Right? He should have hung it up. He lost the whole deal. What did David do about it? Not much. He refused to lay a hand on God's anointed, and God honored that. So I don't want to get all preacher on you, but I would say you tread very lightly into telling your pastor it's time or having someone else tell the pastor it's time. An anonymous-

Carey Nieuwhof:

And maybe could that be a time for that leader to realize they've hit a glass ceiling in the organization, whether they want to be the successor or not. Then you evaluate your own options, right? It's like, "Well, maybe it's time for me to move on."

William Vanderbloemen:

It's one kingdom with many locations, right? So maybe it's your turn to go from village to village and town to town and let God work it out, as God will work it out. Sometimes, I've seen it, sometimes pastors will hire me for succession and one of two things happens when we get in consultation. Either it speeds up or it slows down, it never stays on the same schedule they thought.

William Vanderbloemen:

And sometimes it'll slow down because the pastor hangs on too long. Sometimes the pastor really does hear a word from the Lord as only they have been able to, for the history of the church, "I need to just hang in there. I need to end it." You look back with hindsight and you're like, "Wow, how'd they know that?" The longer I do this, the more stern I am toward those in the second chair or the third chair saying, "Let God sort that out. Pray all you want, but do not sow any seeds of discord or approach the conversation." You can send them a free copy of the book. Maybe you do that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Earmark that page.

William Vanderbloemen:

Exactly. But the good news, if you're sitting in that second chair, if you'd asked me the same question 10 years ago, I'd have said, "Oh, I hate this for you because no one really talks about it." The good news is, everyone is talking about it right now. Every peer group of pastors in their sixties, it is. I get called in, whether it's the leaders of the Southern Baptist Church leaders of the Presbyterian Church. I get called in two years ago to a meeting of the hundred senior pastors of the hundred largest black churches in the US, okay? Not like ethnically diverse. They're like, no, we're black church, I was the diversity in the room. That's it? And I'm like, "Guys, why are y'all having me in here?" Because this is a conversation and it's time to have it. And we don't even know how to.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. Want to be really careful with the next question. But you raise it in the book and you were very public on your profile and you and I had some conversations, but you led the Willow Creek search. And I think that was one of those things where, with Bill Hybels, he had tried, the succession was 15 years ago, that didn't work. And then all the allegations came forward and resigned in moral failure, et cetera. And the church fell apart. What are some lessons there that can help? And I'm not here to point fingers. I'm not here to blame. I don't like to engage in that, but you do have some lessons in the book about that and hundreds of other churches. You talk about the Crystal Cathedral, you talk about many churches others have not heard of, but that was something, everybody, including people who don't go to church watch transpire. So anything you can share that would help leaders try to figure out, "Here's something constructive we can take from that."

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, I've got one real clear constructive, but a little backstory first. And that is I've seen the sausage factory, right? And particularly a lot of it with Willow. And I have so much respect for that church. I was a pastor, Carey. I was in seminary, I thought I was going to go get a PhD and be a professor at school because I wasn't going to be a preacher. And then I realized that wasn't going to work. I got in a wrestling match with God, I limp, and I became a pastor. I lost. And I went into ministry and was doing what I grew up with, was being a Presbyterian pastor of a regular church. And you just take care of people, which is a great calling for a whole lot of people. But I am like a serial entrepreneur, and this was like oil and water.

William Vanderbloemen:

And I started my D.Min. My Doctor of Ministry early at Reform Seminary. And they let me sign up early and I ended up having dinner with someone at the school that said, "Sign up today." Well, the only class that was open was a class on small groups or something like, "Okay, fine." And I had to go to this church to a conference to take the class, and it was to Willow Creek, and it was their old, bootcamp conference they did years and years ago.

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:18:04]

William Vanderbloemen:

And I remember where I was sitting in the Lakeside Auditorium, when Bill did that thing that only he can do, where he reached from the stage... I remember what he was wearing, because he wore the same thing throughout the 1990s. But he reached out from the stage and somehow all the way across that auditorium, and tapped me on the chest, and God used that moment to have a mini conversion, and it changed my ministry. So, human leaders should always be respected, but we can't ever forget they have clay feet. Right? So I don't want to throw him under the bus or throw the church-

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, no, no. It's one of the most perplexing things. And I've had this discussion many times.

William Vanderbloemen:

I would not be where I am today were it not for Bill. And I made a point throughout the search of not contacting him one time, because I don't want him to have to say, "Well, William..." I don't want me to have to say the... So stayed out of that, but what are some lessons? Okay. I wanted to give that backstory so people understand, I am so unwilling to throw rocks here, right? And it's not unwilling to take a stand.

William Vanderbloemen:

Here's here's the backstory to every one of those succession stories you listed, whether it's Crystal Cathedral, or First Baptist Dallas, or First Pres Hollywood, or Willow Creek or churches you don't even remember. Laodicea, Smirna, go through the seven that aren't there anymore. No pastor wakes up one morning and says, "I think I want to blow up my church." Not one. But part of the reason I was excited to do the rewrite of the book, was I had to get rid of Mars Hill Seattle. I couldn't talk about NewSpring in South Carolina anymore, and Perry. I couldn't... Lots and lots of examples of great churches.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's a long list.

William Vanderbloemen:

It's a long list. And some of it is not even these guys' faults. That's a long podcast we can do another time, but nobody wakes up and says, "Let me wreck my church." Okay? I think the other big lesson that I learned from Willow, one of the things they did really well... And the jury is going to be out. It'd be 20 years before we know whether the thing worked or not, right? So let's not claim success. They do have an amazing pastor in Dave Dummitt. We gave them our best consultant to be their exec pastor in Tim Stevens. And they've got a lot of good going for them, but I think that one of the coolest things I saw was the elders that stepped down, got replaced by people that have never been elders. And I used to joke and say, "It's like I've got all rookies playing in the Superbowl trying to pick a pastor."

William Vanderbloemen:

It wasn't... And somebody pointed out to me, very wisely, they said, "But William, that's how Willow's always worked. It was a bunch of kids that didn't know what they were doing." And so now they've got elders that don't know what they're doing, and they did a good job. And maybe a lesson is, when you get in this crisis, the place blew up and you didn't know why. Maybe it's why Paul said to one of those churches in Revelation, "Remember your first loves." When you find yourself in that heart, just go back to the first things and try and recapture some of that. And that might be your guiding light through a really hard time. For pastors that have blown it up, hey man, I've blown stuff up too. I'm telling you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And I just want to clarify, I know you're not saying this, but just to clarify, maybe it's in some cases, there are situations where it's not their fault. But if you hurt people and harm other people, that is your responsibility.

William Vanderbloemen:

Totally.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I know you agree with that. I just wanted to say that, just to...

William Vanderbloemen:

I hurt people. I caused harm. It was my fault. I will own it. But that doesn't mean God's done with you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's really interesting. And again, to quote Gordon MacDonald, I had a friend text me who was dealing with a moral failure, that will not make the headlines. It's just this happens every day, right? It's just some of the big churches make the headlines and a lot of the other churches don't, and it was an associate position at the staff, and he said, "What is the good content out here?" Because I think there's two things. It's either, somebody says they're sorry, they want to get back into ministry the day after they resign. And like, "I'm back and I'm starting a church." Or, "I'm doing this." And I'm like, "I don't think that's it." Or you banish them to the wilderness to die forever. And nobody ever hears of them or speaks of them again, and their life is functionally over. And there's no reconciliation.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I don't think that's it either. But Gordon MacDonald wrote *Ordering Your Private World*. But then, of course, he had an affair, which many people would say was out of character for him. And he was deeply remorseful. And then wrote a book called *Rebuilding Your Broken World*. And that didn't sell nearly as many copies as *Ordering Your Private World*, both are great books. But I think it's part three of that book, and we'll link to it in the show notes, has a process for restoration, that I think just should get front news coverage in the church these days. Because you put yourself under the authority of other people, you forfeit your rights. You go back when they say you're ready, not when you say you're ready, and there's a whole restoration process in there. And I've found it just so redemptive. And in the few cases where that's been followed, it has been a beautiful and harmonious restoration for all involved, and true reconciliation.

William Vanderbloemen:

And ironically, I might be wrong about this, I'm fairly certain I'm right. But ironically, one of the people Gordon's submitted to for guidance about when to come back, was Bill.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You might be right. That I don't know. But...

William Vanderbloemen:

I believe he was on that group, but why do I bring that up? Not to defend him, but just to say if you screwed up, there's a price to pay. Right? But it doesn't mean it's over. I just... Doesn't mean it's over. And I used to... When we started this Carey, part of what we get hired to do, when we're finding a leader, is making sure that we're finding people who are who they say they are. Right? So you're not getting a charlatan or somebody who's telling fibs or looks great online, but not so good in person, right? And so, you asked these questions in an interview, you say you want to find out if there's skeletons in the closet, right?

William Vanderbloemen:

And so, you try and find cute ways of saying it. And I don't do this anymore, but one of the dumbest ways I've ever asked this question, is I used to say, "So Carey, are there any moral failures that we need to go ahead and talk about now, rather than find out about later? Do you have any moral failures in your life?" And I was asking this question, and then it was probably 10, 11 years ago now. And this kid, I was interviewing for a youth pastor position, he was probably 24, 25, "Hey, are there any moral failures in your life?" And he just looked at me and he said, "William, I am a moral failure."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Great answer.

William Vanderbloemen:

I got schooled. This is why Jesus came here. Doesn't mean you can go back to your church. Doesn't mean you should go plant something right down the road. But, Jesus came here to seek and save the lost. And that's not just once and for all. And I just encourage you. You probably didn't set out to blow up your church. And you may not be able to go back there, but it doesn't mean that God's done with you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

In my case, my marriage stayed intact, and there was no scandal, I just imploded when I burned out. And I thought it was over. I worked too hard, I worked too long, and it's not like I was perfect. I had stuff God was working on in my life, but nothing that would get me fired or anything like that. And I thought it was over, and I had no idea that it was a refining for what was ahead. And I think that is a good word. And I know there's a lot of tired, a lot of discouraged leaders. There's a great book, we'll link into the show notes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'm trying to remember who it was from, but it was about 10 reasons that people have moral failure. We'll find it. We'll link it to it in the show notes. I'm trying to remember who it was. And I read it, and it was things like, "I stayed too long." Or, "I was out of season." Or, "I wasn't with the people who could hold me accountable," or whatever. But there were some really unlikely ones as well. We'll link to that in the show notes. So if you find yourself there, we want to help. And...

William Vanderbloemen:

That gets back to... Carey, the whole, how do you know when it's time to go? A lot of guys that really, and I say guys, because we're the ones that mess up more than the women most of the time. And yes, that was chauvinistic, and sorry guys. We're the ones that screw up more.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, we messed it up a lot.

William Vanderbloemen:

Leading on empty doesn't work. Leading on empty doesn't work.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think what got me was his research and he researched this, was if you're six months over when you should've made a shift, whether that's a job change or a calling change or an organization change, he says you get bored and you start getting restless, and that's when the not very healthy behavior starts. So anyway, it's a really interesting, we'll find the book. I will discover it. William, covered so much. Anything else you want to share before we call this round?

William Vanderbloemen:

No, no. I just say, Willow's had a hard time, we'd talked about them. They're going to have choppy water before it gets better, probably. But man, being in the middle of that and watching how Jesus is moving in that church.

Carey Nieuwhof:

There are still people who love Jesus. I thought Dave was a great choice for that. And he brought in some of his team to... I think he brought his assistant, and two-

William Vanderbloemen:

That's why we actually talked to Dave, because we wanted to get Haley there.

Carey Nieuwhof:

She's sharp. She's really sharp.

William Vanderbloemen:

Dave's a consolation prize to the church. Haley's the winner. No, I just say that to say, you might not be a Willow Creek. You might be... "Well, we only had a hundred people before COVID and I don't even know if people are going to come back." Jesus is working in his church. And we go into some of the biggest train wrecks in the whole kingdom, and Jesus is still there. I promise you he's working in your church, no matter what it feels like this year.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Hey, that's a great place to close this round. Love having you on. Love our conversations. Thanks for helping so many leaders. So, tell us about the book, and then a website where people can find you.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, the book that everybody needs to read, is a book about burnout, but it doesn't come out until next year. So we'll talk about that again later, okay?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Deal.

William Vanderbloemen:

I think that's something that I want to hear what you have to say about. The book that we released in March of 2020, it's a fantastic time to release a book, is Next: Pastoral Succession That Works. And this is an updated and expanded version. It's not in bright yellow, so your staff won't notice if you buy it. We changed the color of the jacket to a nice soothing blue. But there's a whole lot more research in there, and more than we can unpack here, about what works and what doesn't work, when it comes to pastoral transitions.

Carey Nieuwhof:

All right. Well, William, thank you so much.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yes. Always good to be with you, Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, that was a wide-ranging conversation for sure. And you know that book I was looking for, that I couldn't really think of? So, it's called 10 Signs of a Leadership Crash by Stephen Mansfield. It's actually a little bit hard to find, I think right now, according to my research, it's only available on Kindle, but we will link to that in the show notes. And it's actually really good. A little bit eerie actually, about why leaders fail. So you can get that in the show notes. You can go to that, by going to careynieuwhof.com/episode382. There's also transcripts, if you are interested in looking at this with your team, or you're more of a reader, and you want to go back and review that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But we got show notes and top quotes and all that kind of stuff over at careynieuwhof.com/episode382. So, anyway, hey, we have Mark Batterson coming up next time. And again, Mark is another frequent flyer on this guest. I love him. He's a good personal friend. But we had, what I think, is the best conversation we've ever had. And we talked about all kinds of things, including how this year has really impacted him and politics, and how he leads in a partisan city, and what the future of the church will be when he used to have five locations. What's that going to be like post-pandemic? Here's an excerpt.

Mark Batterson:

Well, that's funny, because I'm sitting in a counseling session about a year ago, Carey, and I say to my counselor, "I don't want to disappoint anyone ever." And he turns to me and says, "Well, Mark, that's quite a burden to bear." And then he says, "It seems to me, Jesus disappointed people all the time." Drop the mic. Carey, I'm getting better at disappointing people.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So, that's going to be an awful lot of fun. We've got a lot of episodes for those of you who subscribe. Andy Stanley's going to help us kick off the new year. Jon Acuff is going to interview myself and my wife, about her new book in January. Rachel Cruze, Patrick Lencioni, Rob Pelinka, GM of the LA Lakers, Dr. John Kotter from Harvard Business School. This is a dream for me. Reached out to him, a book that he wrote a long time ago, really made a difference. Excited to have him on the show. Mark Clark is back, Dee Ann Turner, formerly of Chick-fil-A. And so many more. You get that when you subscribe. And now it's time for What I'm Thinking About, and I'm going to talk about, okay, why am I so big on digital?

Carey Nieuwhof:

And I know a lot of you were like, "Really? Why do you keep talking about digital?" So I'm going to talk about physical church attendance. You're right. It's not going away. But is it going to change, and how is it going to change? So let's just have this conversation, okay? This segment is brought to you by Ministry Boost. You can get their brand new course Volunteer Reboot, by going to ministryboost.org/carey. So again, hey, thanks for the respectful dialogue. I really, really appreciate it. I learn along the way. I'm not always right. I'm definitely not always right. But, I want to talk about why I have been talking about digital so much, and is in-person church attendance here to stay? So the answer is, course it is. Of course it is. As long as there are people, people will want to gather. That is just the case.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And are people going to want to gather in your building? Yes, people are going to want to gather in your building. They will. I just think it's going to change. And part of my beating the drum in 2020 about digital is I have spent 25 years in ministry, 25 years in leadership, and I spent the first 12 years in a denominational context where I watched almost all of my colleagues struggling with an old model that was not connecting. And some of them were just indifferent to it, their church wasn't growing, but they were like, "Well, I'm just going to be faithful with the people we have." But it frustrated a lot of people. And I'm like, "Guys, it's the method. We could change our method, and then we'll preserve the mission." And so, if you hear some of the angst, it comes out of years of me trying to help leaders, long before I did any of this podcasting, whatever, and the method was getting in the way of the mission.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So what about in-person church attendance? Is that going to come back? Of course, it's going to come back. I miss everybody. Ironically, I haven't flown anywhere since March, but the very thing that's got me grounded means, I can't see some of my family and my friends. We got the virus surging as Christmas approaches in Canada, as well as it is in the US, and other parts of the world. And so it's really frustrating. Am I looking forward to getting back together with people? Yes. I do one in-person meeting a week with my successor at Connexus, and because we had a couple of situations show up at the office this week, we have to have it by Zoom, and I'm disappointed about that, because I don't know, it's just better when it's in-person.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So, is in-person going to stay? Yeah. Is it going to change? I think so. And there's a couple of different ways I think it's going to change. Okay. So, again, I'm not... This isn't even so much about digital. All right. In-person doesn't necessarily mean in your facility in the future, okay? One of the things that's changed in 2020... And listen, I led a ministry for decades, where it was, "Come on out, join us on Sunday morning, join us at nine, join us at 10, join us at this location, at that location, at another location." Blah, blah, blah. All that stuff. So I get it. I get it. But what I think is interesting, and as somebody who's been at home 90% of the time in 2020, you know what I'm starting to really sense in myself, and in others, as I talked to them, is we are going to gather in person, but does it in person have to be in facility?

Carey Nieuwhof:

And I'm talking to some progressive church leaders. So, and I don't mean progressive politically or theologically, that's not what I'm saying, just forward-thinking. So, Brent Ingersoll on the east coast of Canada, has a large church, 2,000 or 3,000 people, and Brent and I text on a regular basis. And what he's done is what a lot of other people have done. And he can't gather the way he wants, so he's equipping people in their homes. I think that is the future. In the same way that you see a lot of workplaces. So for example, if you're like, "Well, workplace is going to go back into in-person as well." Look at companies like Dropbox. What they're doing now is they're reclaiming their office space. They're lowering it a little bit, in terms of square footage, and they're actually saying, "No, you can work where you are." A distributed workforce.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, what if you had a distributed church in the future? In other words, yes. There will be people who meet in the central facility. For sure. For sure. For sure. But what if you actually add more people meeting in their homes, like the small group gathers on Sunday morning? What if you see that? So in person, I think in the future, I would be rethinking, does that have to mean in your facility? And what that gives you the ability to do is to scale faster. Because you don't have to build square footage. You don't have to build it out, and people will be connected to you, perhaps digitally. They'll be connected to each other in person where they are, and you get a distributed church. A little bit like the small group model has worked, right? Used to be adult Sunday school. "You got to come to the building, take a class."

Carey Nieuwhof:

And we would small groups decades ago. And all of a sudden, you could have a thousand people in small groups, or 10,000, or 100, and you didn't need the real estate for that. So I think in-person gatherings may actually go to that more distributed model, as well as having a studio audience, or some people who gather at the central facility. One of the things I do wonder about is whether in-person church

attendance will, perhaps, become more infrequent church attendance. We were already struggling pre-pandemic with one in four Sunday attendance, once a month or once every six weeks. And I just wonder if, as more and more people embrace a hybrid approach to church, and that's what the data that we're collecting at Barna is showing, is that the majority of younger adults, well really anybody other than Baby Boomers, prefers a hybrid model.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And so, perhaps they used to come one in four weeks, might be one in five, one in six, but they're still engaged. They're still engaged. They're engaged because they watched online, because they're gathering with their group. So, I wonder if in-person might become more infrequent, that might be wrong, might be wrong. It could be that everybody rushes back when there's a vaccine and you get a couple of months, like after 911, and then things distribute out a little bit more beyond that. A couple of other thoughts, and this I mean to be encouraging, but in-person attendance in the building may become a fraction of your overall church. Okay? So yes, you're going to have people in the building. You'll be able to speak in front of a live crowd, if that's how you choose to do it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But you will actually be speaking to more people through the lens of a camera than you do who are actually in the room. And they may be gathering in their homes, they might be gathering in a restaurant. You might be able to reach people you were never able to reach, because digital spans the problem of geography. So your church, you might have 300 people who are actually engaged, meaningfully engaged with your service, but some of them are meeting at home. Some of them are watching online individually. Some of them are in your facility. But let's say 150 are in your facility, and there's another 150 who are watching in a distributed way or gathering in a distributed way. Or maybe it's the other way around. Maybe it's even more than that. You have 150 in the room, but you have 500 who are gathered or dispersed.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And again, if you think this is really foreign, it's foreign compared to the last 20 years. But you look at the New Testament, that's how it worked, right? And so I would see this as an opportunity, rather than an obstacle. Am I beating the drum hard? Yes, I'm beating the drum hard. Why? Because there seems to be, just in this era, the past has a nostalgia that the future never does. The future can seem scary, but I think there is so much opportunity. There is so much opportunity. So anyway, I'll say more about that in the future, but thank you so much for your comments and feedback. Do leave ratings and reviews. Thank you for the encouragement, it does mean a lot. We're all human beings. And I love to hear from you. Hope that helps. Those are some thoughts on in-person attendance. As long as there are people, we will gather. We may just gather a little bit differently in the future. Thanks so much for listening. And I hope our time together today has helped you lead like never before.

Announcer:

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

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