

Announcer:

The Art of Leadership Network.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, Carey here. Thank you so much for joining us today. I hope our time together today helps you thrive in life and leadership. Today, we are going to sit down and have a wide ranging conversation with Andy Crouch. I'm really interested in the breakdown of trust that we've seen across society but also within the church, what personalized technology is doing to us, including its impact on the soul. And we'll talk about the disruption that we're facing, perhaps for the indefinite future as leaders. It was Andy who came up with the whole metaphor two years ago of, "Hey, is this a blizzard, a winter, or an ice age?" Well, we're going to talk about that. So, more about Andy in a minute.

Carey Nieuwhof:

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Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I'm very excited to have Andy Crouch on the podcast today. He's the author of four books. He's also the Partner for Theology and Culture at Praxis, an organization that works as a creative engine for redemptive entrepreneurship. For more than 10 years, Andy was a Producer and then Executive Editor at Christianity Today. His work in writing had been featured in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Time, Best Christian Writing and Best Spiritual Writing. And it's a thrill to have him on the podcast for the very first time.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I want to thank all of you who are new listeners. Thank you so much for tuning in. Have you checked out my brand new podcast, The Art of Leadership Daily, yet? It's been out for a couple of weeks now. You can head on over, just look for The Art of Leadership Daily or search my name, wherever you listen to your podcast. It takes a short excerpt from the now vast archive of episodes we have here and brings you, well, 10 minutes or less from leaders like Simon Sinek, Gordon MacDonald, of course, Andy Crouch, and about, oh, I don't know, 450 other guests I've had. And that's Monday to Friday. So check it out. The Art of Leadership Daily, want you to check that one out as well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

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Carey Nieuwhof:

Also, you know the Great Resignation is far from over, but it's happening now for different reasons. The job market is still hot despite the wobbly economy, unemployment is low, but resignations are up 23% compared to pre-COVID times. That means people are resigning to go to better jobs, or at least in their mind what's a better job. So, now's the time for you as a leader to ask yourself, am I creating a culture of people development or is my team going to walk too? Well, my friends at Leadr are on a mission to transform the Great Resignation to the great resolution. So, Leadr software can help you engage and grow your team by helping every single manager become a coach and giving every employee a voice. Leadr is a people development software that helps you develop leaders at scale with consistent one-on-one meetings, clear goals, so important, and regular feedback. So check them out, go to Leadr, that's L-E-A-D-R, no second D, leadr.com. Use the promo code Carey, C-A-R-E-Y, for 20% off your first year.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, now without much further ado, let's dive into my conversation with Andy Crouch. Andy, it's great to have you on the podcast. Welcome.

Andy Crouch:

Thank you, Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So I want to go back two years because I remember around the time the pandemic started, you, along with a couple of others, posted a pivotal article that got cited widely, and you use the metaphor, is this pandemic thing, which nobody knew what we were signing up for. Is it? And I think the metaphors were, is it a blizzard, a winter, or an ice age? How did you-

Andy Crouch:

Particularly, a Canadian friendly metaphor, I would like to say.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Very Canadian friendly. Absolutely. We long for summer, I'll tell you. And everyone was kind of like, "Hey man, this is a blizzard. We're going to be back open again in a heartbeat." I would love to start there. So two and a half years later, what's your take on it now? What is this? It clearly wasn't a blizzard, probably wasn't winter, but what kind of ice age or winter?

Andy Crouch:

It's been a very long winter if it's only been a winter. Well, the idea of the ice age was not just a season, but a shift in the climate that would be generational. I mean, true ice ages are maybe hundreds of years long. I don't think we were suggesting anything like that, but a kind of permanent change in the climate longer than you can just wait out. Right? So even winter, you sort of can stay indoors for a few months and then come back, and life is normal again.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Truly, yeah.

Andy Crouch:

Whereas the earth, over and over, has had these shifts in climate. Some of which are cooling shifts, ice ages, where for generations, every organism, every ecosystem has to adapt. And in that sense, while it seems that we're past the worst of COVID-19 as a pandemic, I think the results of it, I would stand by, unfortunately, what we wrote, that this is an epochal age-defining, inaugurated, a change in the age. It's not going to be the last act. It may not even be the most memorable or important thing about this time, but we wondered and sensed and felt like leaders needed to attend the possibility that it was going to set in motion changes that we'd be wrestling with for the rest of our lives. And I pretty much think that is going to prove to be the case.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, I would agree with you. And I remember reading that at the time and thinking it through and really hoping this wasn't going to be an ice age, but I couldn't agree more.

Andy Crouch:

Us too.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Nobody's signing up for this, but I think that's a really interesting timeframe. These are changes that are profound enough that we'll be wrestling with them for the rest of our lives.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So our mutual friend David Kinnaman and I, on our other podcast, the ChurchPulse Weekly, have talked about a series of cascading crises for leaders when you look back at the last two and a bit years, and it seems to never end. I mean, just whether it's school shootings, as tragic as they are. I'd love for you to name some of the crises that you think that we're in and then maybe talk about their severity. What are the shifts? What are the characteristics of this ice age that we are moving into, that we will be wrestling with indefinitely, if not for the rest of our lives?

Andy Crouch:

Yeah. Three come to mind, and they're going to operate on perhaps very different time scales. I think they're all going to be significant. The one that foredoom at this moment, as we're speaking, is actually the least of our concerns, that when we wrote the piece was probably the greatest of our concerns, is the economic knock-on effects from the pandemic. It was very plausible in March of 2020 that we were going to see a Great Depression level, worldwide economic event. And because certain central banks printed trillions of dollars, that didn't happen.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

And so I guess that's good.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

I think the honest truth is that this has never been attempted. The amount of money creation that's been attempted in response to the 2008 financial crisis compounded by COVID-19, it's just never been tried before. So we'll see how it goes, but maybe it'll work out okay. I mean, these systems are both very fragile and very adaptable at the same time. So the economic crisis, as we speak now, the world is really being hit by inflation and by shortages of various kinds, that could become quite severe due more to the war in Ukraine than to the pandemic per se. For the moment, I actually think the economic situation is far less grim than we probably expected it would be. So that's good.

Andy Crouch:

The second is going to be the longest to play out, and it is the developmental formational crisis for children and youth. We had a little inkling of this that we wrote about in our piece *Leading Beyond the Blizzard*. When we talked about the fact that eight to 10 years old seems to be... According to the scholarship of this scientist, many others, but including the scientist, Maryanne Wolf, at Tufts has demonstrated that there's this window of opportunity during which you can acquire reading fluency that is reading becomes just fully neurologically, cognitively natural for a human being. And if it's taught in that window, children learn to read very effectively. If they miss that window and they learn to read later, they acquire functional reading but not fluent reading. So they can sort of get by, but you never get the brain wired up to sort of fully immerse yourself in a text. So we were very concerned about the educational impacts, and these have turned out, in differing ways, in different parts of the world and even different parts of our countries, to be quite severe.

Andy Crouch:

The really terrible thing is that in, let's just charitably say, well-intentioned efforts to protect people from infection. Many schools in some of our largest cities in the US at least were shut down fully for an entire year, if not more. The learning that was attempted to be provided over Zoom and so forth was really not at all workable, especially for more challenged communities or less resourced communities. And the deficits that we're now seeing in educational attainment in this cohort of elementary school students, it's absolutely horrifying and it's frankly off of a relatively low baseline. So you think about that cohort of elementary school aged children who missed out for a couple years on years that you just don't get back neurologically.

Andy Crouch:

But I will tell you the thing I totally didn't think about, that I'm actually more concerned about, is what I'm hearing from teachers and administrators and others who work with high school students. And I actually think that just as eight to 10 is the window for acquiring reading fluency, 13 to 15 is the window for acquiring social fluency, the ability to be in a relationship to sort of exchange all the things you exchange with another person, knowing how to talk with someone, knowing how to get upset with someone and not have it just rupture everything, knowing how to take a joke.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

Just all these things that we practice in middle school. It's very painful, it's very awkward, but they missed it. And what I'm hearing from my friends who teach in these environments or work in these environments is absolutely apocalyptic. I've had all these teachers say, "Oh yes, things that we could just take for granted in our ninth graders two years ago, or in 2019, we can't even..." I had one teacher say, "We can't do group exercises." He said, "I used to teach all with group discussion." He said, "My eighth graders just do not know how to have a group discussion. They're fifth graders. They can't stay on topic. They can't interact with each other."

Andy Crouch:

The thing is, maybe some of this can be made up. It's going to be really hard to make up those basic learning deficits. Can the social deficits be made up? I'm not sure. But I think we are going to see a hundred years of effects from the kind of missed opportunities of very broadly speaking socialization for a generation of kids who are just going to grow up having to make do as best as they can. They will make their way through the world somehow, but there will be a lot of things that will happen, that will get blamed on other things, that actually their root cause will be what they missed out on as children, through no fault of their own.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, and that's compounding on already what a lot of people would say is social breakdown and the inability of even adults to have a conversation.

Andy Crouch:

Exactly. And this actually was going to be my third thing, which is the crisis of trust in institutions generally.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Mm-hmm.

Andy Crouch:

And this is more the adult version of that, that really... Pandemics historically rarely create whole new situations. They just accelerate things that were already happening. And in the long run, they don't matter nearly as much as the other changes that were happening around them, but that they accelerate. We were already, in different ways, and it differs from country to country, but in a kind of breakdown of trust in fundamental institutions. But it was tremendously accelerated, partly by the direct events of the pandemic.

Andy Crouch:

We wrote in March of 2020. We didn't anticipate that in May of 2020, a police officer would murder a man in broad daylight in especially gruesome way that would be witnessed on video by hundreds of millions of people. Probably many people have never actually watched an actual murder, and we watched a murder. I actually did not watch the video. I chose not to watch it, but many, many people did. And the trauma of that, the rage of that, the collapse of trust that that caused and the knock-on effects, especially severe in the US, but setting off echoes everywhere in the world.

Andy Crouch:

This is maybe the deepest crisis because the question of, is there any neutral ground that we can meet on and trust that it will be fair for us to all be in this space, whether that's a street in Minneapolis or a court, a court of law, or a church? There's a real crisis of trust in all of these institutions now. So, welcome to the ice age. All this is going to be the reality. For the rest of our lives, we're going to be unraveling each of these things, the economic, the educational, and the institutional.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'd like to break that down a little bit, because actually it's funny, earlier today, I was working on a series that I'm working on for our church on the breakdown of trust. And it's a rare time that I sit down and I'm like, "Yeah, I don't even know." I pick the subject, it's my fault. But even diagnosing how bad the issue is, is incredible.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And so I'm trying to surf off of, "Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself." Well, how do you love God and how do you love your neighbor if you can't trust God and can't trust your neighbor and the only person you trust is yourself?

Andy Crouch:

Wow, wow.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a really profound issue, and I'm struggling even to have words. Maybe I'll abandon it and do a simple series. That would be easier, but-

Andy Crouch:

Do something on sex or something simple like that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Something on sex, that's got to be less challenging, Andy. But I'm sitting there looking at my notes, going, this is a really profound subject. And I'd love your take on that because I think you're right. The same way that to protect ourselves, we isolated ourselves. Somebody pointed out to me, right? In the pandemic, the other people became the enemy, right?

Andy Crouch:

Yeah, right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Are you going to infect me? Is someone else going to infect me?

Andy Crouch:

Right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And whether that lasted a month or two years, depending on where you lived or what your perspective is, it really kind of weaponized humanity. But then we also lost trust in each other, we lost trust in our politicians, which was already low. What happens when trust breaks down? What happens when you become... And then we all trust ourselves. Right? So now I'm an expert on global supply chain. I'm an expert on pandemic. I'm an expert on racial justice.

Andy Crouch:

I've done my research.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I've done all my research. Yeah. I've been on YouTube for at least 28 minutes. And I'll tell you all about it. What happens when you become the locus of trust?

Andy Crouch:

Yeah. That's a very insightful way to put it, I think. I haven't thought about that, that the only ones we are left to trust in is ourselves and perhaps people who seem sufficiently like ourselves, who we assemble sort of on the go to reinforce our sense of ourselves.

Carey Nieuwhof:

A little gang tribe that we've assembled online. Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. Well, let me approach it this way and just say, I think there is a tiny sliver of good news here which is, all trust is actually built on rupture and repair. This is something I've been thinking about quite a bit in the last few months.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Andy Crouch:

I draw these words from my friend, Curt Thompson, who you might know, he's a psychiatrist.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

Really, really insightful writer and teacher and counselor in the way of healthy life, you might say. And Curt, in his books and in his ministry and teaching, talks about these two words, rupture and repair, that the fact is that the only way I ever come to trust anyone is to have some degree of interruption in the relationship. This first happens in human development between usually the mother and the child, or the caregiver and the child. I'm talking about the first moments of infancy in a way because the child needs

the mother there. Let's just say the mother is often the one who provides that initial care, but then the mother has to leave the room and you're handed to an aunt or the dad or whoever for a moment. And where did she go? Is she coming back? Right? So this is the first layer of rupture and repair, is simply absence and then renewed presence. And just that simple rhythm that when you start to look for it, you realize it characterizes all of our lives.

Andy Crouch:

Later today, I'll go down and we'll have dinner again, my wife and then actually my son, who's been living away from home. He's back for a short visit. So he's come back. Right? And we come back to dinner sort of every night. We've gone our separate ways during the day, we come back. And that's the building block of trust, is you were gone, but now you're back. So that's very basic.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Mm-hmm.

Andy Crouch:

But then you have these deeper ruptures which require more intentional repair. And I've thought of the next layer, you could call failure and recovery. And that's when something breaks down, not necessarily through anyone's fault, and then you have to work to sort of repair it. There may not even be any blame. The world is unpredictable. For example, I thought you were picking our kid up at school today and you got a flat tire and it didn't happen. Right? It's not really anyone's fault, but there's still a question of, how do we recover from that breakdown and what we expected it would be like. Trust is built in that way too, when we're resilient and we work through it.

Andy Crouch:

And then the deepest one is sin and forgiveness, where there's actually not just failure but fault. So the reason this is good news is, we were coasting on certain assumptions about who we could trust and why, that have now been tested, and in some cases and ways, really deeply broken. But this is actually just the invitation to the next stage of trust, which is rebuilding through forgiveness, where there's been sin and also repentance, of course, and conversion in a way, and mercy and all that through just resilience. Gosh, that failure was hard. We lost a lot. We may never get it back, but we're still going to find a way to move forward together. And then also through just returning to being present. I do want to say, Carey, even just this absence presence thing, it's different for each of our listeners probably because in Texas, in the US, I don't think COVID ever happened. People just kept doing their thing. Philadelphia-

Carey Nieuwhof:

It was about 14 minutes. That was it. Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

Exactly. Right. It was like, it was a blizzard.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It was. It was.

Andy Crouch:

In Canada, it was a lot longer; in Philadelphia, a lot longer.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh yeah, it's an ice age.

Andy Crouch:

So we're talking in the spring of 2022 here, and I've just, for about two months, been able to be back in actual presence of people. And I will tell you, there are several relationships, individual relationships with people who I hadn't seen in a couple of years because we just couldn't, we lived far enough apart and all that. And in subtle ways, I was starting to mistrust them. I started to have little narratives in my mind of what was going on in their lives and little hints I would pick up. This happened very vividly for me just a couple weeks ago with someone I just really thought things were going in the wrong direction for this person and in our relationship. We get back together in person and go for a walk and catch up. And I realized, most of that, I was just imagining.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Ah.

Andy Crouch:

Some of what I wasn't imagining, there's a deeper story that I can now pay attention to in a deep way in person. I have no idea how that other person felt about me, but I left with this renewed sense, "Oh, I totally want to be in relationship with this person." I mean, maybe I live too much in my head or have a too active imagination or whatever, but I mean, this just ring true.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yes.

Andy Crouch:

You start to build these narratives, and just when you come back together. So I want to encourage people, as you start rebuilding that in person presence, trust begins to return in a really important way. Now, the sad thing is, many of our churches, there are some people who just will never come back and so you'll never get that presence again. But for those who do come back, I think there's so much room to rebuild from here, even though we're in a great crisis. Now, how all this scales up to the massive institutions that we have in our modern world? I do not exactly know, but maybe we just begin where we are and start rebuilding.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's interesting because, yeah, we have largely tracked with people we know online for months or a couple of years in some cases. I had a very similar thing happen where one person drank the crazy pill, I thought. And I thought, "Wow, he's really gone off the deep end." And then we haven't really had that walk yet.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But in the few times that I've connected with that person, it's like, "Oh yeah, you're a real human. And you're actually a decent human. Maybe your feet is a little bit crazy trained, but you're a really good person." And it really does change that. So I think that that is helpful and helpful. And I think you're right, forgiveness, repentance, and even understanding and empathy for someone else's viewpoint can be really good.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And I've come to think of it. I'm thinking of a friend, we hung out with recently. She had a reconciliation with her sister and they were on opposite ends of the whole COVID thing. It was like, "Oh, that's right. We do actually get along and it might be different." But what do you do now? Because this is a leadership podcast, a lot of people are leading those institutions, and I think the average pastor, the average business leader may have gone down a couple of notches in trust in that just because you hold a position. You know?

Andy Crouch:

Yep.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We've talked about this for decades. John Maxwell wrote about holding a title doesn't make you a leader, et cetera, two decades ago.

Andy Crouch:

Mm-hmm.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So we know this, but it really seems to have accelerated. So what are the implications for institutions that are mistrusted? Whether that's congregations, denominations, associations, universities, seminaries, governments, they're all sort of mistrusted now and got a lot of violence.

Andy Crouch:

Wow. Well, a couple thoughts. I mean, one is, don't neglect the 12 that you can actually have the most connected relationship with. None of us can sustain a large number of real personal connections. And so I think of, all leadership, all culture making happens in these circles of three, 12, and 120. The three is the core inner circle where there can be, I think often you could truly say total trust. We know each other so well that we don't always agree, but there's never a fundamental breakdown because we know what each other's feeling, thinking is probably how they're going to respond in a given moment.

Andy Crouch:

The 12 is the next circle out. And 12 is the number that's important because in a room of real human beings, a physical room, not a Zoom room, 12 is about the maximum number where you can actually simultaneously attend to what each person is subtly thinking and feeling. You know when someone's out of sorts. You know when someone is restless. You know when someone isn't really on board. You get much bigger than 12, and I think it's literally wired into our brains, you just lose the ability to keep track. You can hardly keep track if everybody's even there. That's when you start using the buddy system to make sure all the kindergartners are still here. But with 12, and I think it's kind of the maximum, you can do that. Every leader, I think, right now needs to be thinking, "How am I pouring into trust? Not just with my three." And I think that the temptation is to shrink our circles just to-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Have one person left that I can trust, right? Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, hundred percent.

Andy Crouch:

Exactly, right. But that's very dangerous, so you need to be pushing out to get that 12 together at whatever cost you can afford to pay and maybe a little more sacrificially investing in time because that needs to be solid. And there may be rupture and repair to be worked through there. Again, that's not bad news, that's just the way relationships are built and the way trust is built. The challenge with institutional leadership is that you have so many more than 12, who are looking to you, who are paying attention, who are trying to interpret what you're doing.

Andy Crouch:

Two things come to mind here. One, which is very general, well, they're both kind of general, but one which is perennially true, is that you have to lead through symbolic action. So the way that leaders get things done at institutional scale, is they make very considered choices about what they're going to do in public, when and why, because you've got to choose moments that somehow signal and compress and condense into a brief moment, all the values you're trying to advance. And I don't know how to prescribe that. I think for those of us who are Christian, you pray for the Holy Spirit to give me the right moment to say the right thing, or do the right thing, or not do something, or whatever. You got to look for those symbolic actions. And I think in this moment, you have to ask, "What are the biggest fault lines? And what are the symbolic actions available to me that would reframe for this community I'm entrusted with leading? A different way of seeing where we're stuck maybe."

Andy Crouch:

The other thing I would say is, and this may be always true but I feel like it's a particular temptation right now, I think everything's so polarized that it's so tempting to just be vague, just sort of not talk about the things. I actually think this moment requires clarity from leaders, and it's going to come at a cost. Because the moment you clarify, "Here's what we're doing about masks," pick whatever the hot topic is, you are going to lose people. And that betrayal and loss is just the pain, it's just the deep pain of

leadership. But the alternative is staying vague in a way that allows everybody to misinterpret you and spin your absence of clarity for their own purposes, and then you lose everybody.

Andy Crouch:

In the short run, I don't think we're going to be able to keep these kind of big, big tents together. I think we're going to need leaders who say, "This is where we're going. This is why. This is the sacrificial logic behind it. This is the repentance behind it. This is the heart behind it. And you may not go with us, but this is where we're going." And I feel like there's a temptation right now for leaders to back away from that, try to keep everybody on board. And I just think the back channels of interpretation are going to overwhelm you if you try to do that, if you're not clear.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

Does that makes sense?

Carey Nieuwhof:

By definition, that's not leadership. Right? Leadership is, "Here's what we're about. Here's where we're going. I invite you to follow."

Andy Crouch:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I want to talk about symbolic leadership because I think that's a really important point. It's interesting. Well, a bunch of questions actually. Let me start here actually, 120, why 120?

Andy Crouch:

Well, I didn't make these numbers up.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, yeah.

Andy Crouch:

Right. It's 120 in the room at Pentecost, that's how many, which is actually an amazingly small number. I sometimes say, 120 is how many people you need to change history because there's only 120 there, and yet that's all it takes. It's a very small number. Many, many churches in North America are about 120 people. So I pick that number, partly because this is obviously the logic of the ministry of Jesus. He has the three: Peter, James, and John. He's got the 12. Of course, 12 is a flexible number because we know the women who are very much part of the community, they're not named as the 12, but they're definitely disciples, and they end up having kind of apostolic roles in various ways. And then the 120 is clearly a somewhat flexible number.

Andy Crouch:

But the idea is, the 12, you can have face-to-face relationship with. The 120, you can have real buy-in for a mission. And that number shrinks or expands depending on the kind of scale of the mission. I mean, if you think about a feature film, which is one of the most complex things that we human beings make these days, there's probably five or 600 people involved. It's still a small group compared to the millions and millions of people who will watch the film. Right? But the principle of 120 is, basically, the actual culture-making energy is channeled through a relatively small group, considering the scale of the mission. I mean, God has a mission to renovate the entire cosmos, especially this human story on planet earth. How many people does he start with? On Pentecost, 120, not a thousand, not 3000, that comes later, not millions. You'd think you need millions of people to impact millions of people. Right? Not true. You need 120 people. So, does that help with that part?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, that helps a lot. It's a little reflective of Robin Dunbar's work.

Andy Crouch:

Yes, exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Dunbar's number, right? What's his book called?

Andy Crouch:

Very influential.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's called How Many Friends Can One Person Have?

Andy Crouch:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

He breaks down all of civilization into groups of 200 or less, and then smaller circles.

Andy Crouch:

Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And actually references Jesus. But I think that's really important. And I wonder, looking back on the last couple of years, whether people's circle has shrunk to the point where it's just themselves, and maybe you start with those three and move to those 12 and then start thinking about the 120 as a remedy. That's really helpful and practical.

Andy Crouch:

Well, can I drill down that for a moment?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, please.

Andy Crouch:

I think the other thing that happened is, I think we got infatuated with the broadcasting potential of Zoom. And I would hear all the time from pastors in particular who would say, "Oh, well actually we have a lot of people attending our services." The problem is, that medium is not good for building the kind of real in-depth trust that you need. And I think those were superficial results. I mean, time will tell, but time is kind of telling, and an awful lot of places that saw an initial surge in online attendance. Now, most megachurches are down 50% from what I'm hearing in terms of who's coming back. The other thing is, even that circle of 12 is too many on Zoom because you can't actually pay attention to 12 little rectangles on your screen in the way you can to 12 human beings around a table. So, the really critical thing is reestablishing these circles of trust, which never get bigger than Dunbar's number, I think. So anyway, that's maybe around the trail, but I think important.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, that's super helpful. When it comes to symbolic leadership, the example that came to mind, I just want to make sure we're tracking on the same thing, I think that's important a leader has to choose what he or she does at particular times to sort of embody leadership. So I remember when we were planting our church, you are responsible for everything, like I'm setting up and tearing down with the crew and everything, and then eventually get a little more established and you're not part of the setup team. But every once in a while, I'd show up earlier, stay late, and stack chairs just to show that, "Hey, I know this isn't my most valuable role, but I'm with you guys." Is that what you-

Andy Crouch:

Totally.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

Totally. In fact, I was just with a really amazing church community in Austin, Texas called the Austin Stone. It's a large church. It has six congregations, one kind of governance structure. And do you know the thing that most impressed me? I was with their whole staff. It looked like maybe 80 people were there at least that day. So it's kind of that scale organization. The thing that most impressed me was, at the end of every meeting, and I was in several different settings with different groups and they were often in kind of multipurpose spaces, and at the end of every meeting, everyone picked up whatever stuff needed to be put away. And with incredible energy and enthusiasm, did the work together and got it done really fast.

Andy Crouch:

And I said to my host, I said, "Do you know how unusual your culture is?" Because I've been plenty of places where when the meeting's over, a certain group of staff, it's their job to clean up and everybody just kind of leaves, the facilities people, or whatever, clean up. Or I've been in places where people do that work of cleanup, but sort of slowly and lazily because it's not the most fun thing. And what was so

striking, Carey, was everyone was in it together with this incredible enthusiastic energy. It was so striking. I was like, "What's going on in this community that people love to clean up after a meeting? I've never seen this anywhere quite the way it was." So that kind of thing has real power to generate a kind of centrifugal force that says, "We belong together. We love being together." Even the sort of tough stuff, the less rewarding stuff, the less glamorous stuff is worth doing together.

Andy Crouch:

My host, John Murchison, one of their pastors, he said, "Well, I think it's in our DNA from starting in meeting in schools where we had to break up and tear down every day. And our leaders just set the pattern way back when we started. We're going to do this together. It's going to be fun." It was so inspiring to see a community that lived that way. Even though now they're at scale and there's lots of people who could reasonably say, "This is not my job," but you didn't feel like anybody was saying, "That's not my job."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Do you have any acts of symbolic leadership that you would love to see from leaders at this moment? Can you think of an example? It's like, "Oh wow. I'd love to see a leader do this."

Andy Crouch:

Well, the fundamental question of leaders is, are you in this for you or for me? If you are the leader and I'm the follower, are you calling me to this level of investment and sacrifice to sort of amass power for yourself? Are you inviting me into this way, truly because it's best for me? Unfortunately, we have a lot of evidence that a lot of the time, the true motivation is to accumulate power, prestige, status, whatever, for the leaders. So I think when leaders go out of their way to attend to someone who is of no use to them, someone who does not add to their prestige. I think about this as the Instagram buddy problem.

Andy Crouch:

I don't know... Maybe I'm the only person who's ever commented on this and maybe it's going to sound weird that I notice this, but I've noticed that when people take pictures of themselves and post them on Instagram with other people, they often post pictures of themselves with more attractive people than themselves. I mean, it's just true. Or equally or more attractive. Right? Like, "Oh, wow. Look at your friends. Wow." You know?

Carey Nieuwhof:

You're impressive.

Andy Crouch:

And of course, we also impress pictures and-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Or bigger status or more power, or more followers or whatever.

Andy Crouch:

Exactly, exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, yeah.

Andy Crouch:

And it's just the subtle way that we signal, "Hey, look at the kind of friends I have. Look at the kind of people I hang out with." Everybody from middle schoolers to megachurch pastors does it, I'm afraid.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Mm-hmm.

Andy Crouch:

So what would it look like to have your picture taken, literally or metaphorically, with someone who doesn't make you look better, but who you are with because you genuinely need something from them? So they're not useful in the sense of accumulating your own power, but they are a teacher of the way you want to live, or a model of something your community needs to care for that won't accrue any benefit. Does this make sense? I don't know if I'm saying this as clearly as I should.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, it does make sense. It's really interesting. I've had a number of conversations with people over the years about the pressure people feel on social media. And I guess I'm just old enough to have a good, long pre-digital life.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And I'm like, try not to make it too glamorous people. Try not to make it too glamorous and to be reflective of what life really is in the people you actually hang out with. I think that's really good counsel.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah. And to push it a bit, I think about the extremities of life are, in some ways, the times when we are of no material use to others and we have to be valued simply for who we are. So this is when we're infants, when we're very old, and when we are temporarily or permanently disabled or incapacitated in some way. If you are a leader of a big successful organization, do your people see you with people with intellectual disabilities, just engaging with them, learning from them, caring for them, honoring them? Do they see you with people who are very old and past the stage of life where they can vigorously contribute? They probably can't pick up the chair at the end of the service or whatever, but they matter and do show that they matter.

Andy Crouch:

I think this is very neglected in our productivity-obsessed world and status-obsessed world. But I think it sets a community free when we realize the person who's in charge of this thing is not just in it to extract value from us, but is in it to actually impart value no matter our usefulness or lack of utility to the mission narrowly understood.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So I'm curious, I think that's a really good point, do you think that has become harder over the last 15 years as social media has overtaken our lives and our culture? I agree with you, but it seems to me that there was a naturalness to what you just described a decade and a bit ago that seems to have perhaps become harder today. Because so much of... I'm thinking of this, Andy, feel free to disagree, take it in a different direction, but everything is curated. Right?

Andy Crouch:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Everything is curated. You look at even HGTV, and nobody can have a crappy house anymore. It's like, it's got to be perfect. Right? Your life-

Andy Crouch:

Even things being renovated, you're like, "It wasn't so bad actually."

Carey Nieuwhof:

It wasn't that bad. That wasn't years ago. It's fine. Right? It's fine. And like everything, I think we just have this collective pressure that we're always on. We're always with the cool people. You're right. It's like, we're all living in middle school again. It's just known as social media. But I don't know whether that's a really good challenge, because I'm waiting back into preaching at my church, and I'm like, "Yeah, it's very easy to become the green room pastor these days."

Andy Crouch:

Exactly. Oh man, don't get me started on green rooms. But-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, I don't think we have one. Well, actually we do, but pastors don't use it. I just hide them off.

Andy Crouch:

That's encouraging.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And then I gave my office away, so there you go.

Andy Crouch:

Oh, hey, you're doing very well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I don't know.

Andy Crouch:

Now, you just have to give up your podcast and then you'll...

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, then I'll give up my podcast. I gave one away already. Maybe I'll give more away.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah. I think it's the mediation, I think, that is part of it. I think it's also a kind of just pressure toward productivity. I think there's even another layer. This is a little bit of what my most recent book is about.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

It's the impersonal transactional nature of how we get things done in our world now. That almost to be effective in the world that technology has made, broadly speaking, including media, requires a kind of transactional calculation at moments that never used to require that calculation. It's very connected to kind of a breakdown of fundamental community. It is not that long ago that just what it meant to be a pastor was you visited the sick in your congregation. And why is it now that that's not assumed that the pastor will do that, especially in multi-staff type churches? It's because the pressure is to deliver a certain kind of product at a certain kind of scale and pace, and the actual collapse of a community that was cohesive enough, that it would matter that the pastor knew your aging parents and knew the family with a disabled child.

Andy Crouch:

Part of the problem is, from a just purely transactional point of view, if you're the pastor of a typical kind of middle class, let's say, congregation, most of North America is middle class and most of North America is embedded in this kind of technological world, fairly impersonal, fairly transactional world, if you go visit that person, it doesn't actually benefit anything in the community because they're so atomized and isolated from the other people in the community that that visit, it doesn't get talked about, it doesn't sort of reinforce any bonds that exist between people. And it used to be that the pastor was sort of one of the people who held that whole thing together. But now, that thing doesn't hold together, they're all individual consumers showing up at your doorstep for religious goods and services. And each of them wants a thing from you, which if you spend too much time with that sick person, you're not going to deliver the goods, and it's not actually going to feed back into communal connection.

Andy Crouch:

So, it would be easy to create a sense of blame or shame that we don't do this as much as we should. But I think there's powerful logic as each of us as leaders just tries to assess what moves the needle and my people feeling like I matter. Well, it matters a lot more that I show up with a really great thing on Sunday than that I was in the hospital on Tuesday, because there's not the web of relationship that would say, "Yes, Carey visited so and so on Tuesday." Does that make sense?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, yeah, no points for that. It's interesting because 27 years ago, I started at these little churches, and I still live in the same community. Those churches are buildings we sold and the people have

morphed into what is now Connexus Church. And most of the people I started with, they were in their 50s when I got here, so they're not around anymore. They passed on.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But some of those visits, I remember being with a 97-year-old woman, her name was Aunt Jenny. She died over a few days. It took Aunt Jenny a long time to die. It really did.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But I was with her with the family over those two or three days, and I'd pop in every day to see her. Those are some of my fondest memories.

Andy Crouch:

Wow.

Carey Nieuwhof:

The church was small, but it was growing. But that kind of personal connection. And now, yeah, you can have millions of followers, but it feels fundamentally shifted and different and maybe not as deeply rewarding or meaningful. And I think maybe, is that an Andy Stanley type thing where you do for one what you wish you could do for everyone, if you're leading a lot of people? Or any thoughts on how you do that? Because a lot of leaders listening to this are leading large churches, large organizations, large companies, and are like, "Yeah, I'd love to go back to 50 people, but we're not in that world."

Andy Crouch:

You are and you aren't, or you aren't and you are.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Aha.

Andy Crouch:

You aren't in the sense that, sure, there are things that grow and scale, and not always because we want them to or in the way we want them to. Some of this happens inadvertently, and we're like, "Oh shoot, this thing got really big. What do I do?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yes.

Andy Crouch:

But in another way, to the extent you are really a leader and not just a performer, you have a circle of 120 and a circle of 12 and a circle of three. So I might not say, as you attribute to Andy Stanley, like do for one, I would say, "Do for the 120." So there should be, in your life, roughly plus or minus 120 people for whom you are pouring yourself out in that sacrificial way. And the way that things actually grow sustainably is, those circles multiply. So conceivably, every one of those 120, if you're a bishop in the early church or in some church structures today, those might be your priests or your presbyters, your elders. Right? And they've each got a congregation, but the bishop is caring for that 120 group of priests. Each of them is caring.

Andy Crouch:

So the way to grow in a healthy way is to multiply these circles of three, 12 and 120. Now, the way to grow in an unhealthy technological way is use lots of media to gather people together and put on a show for them that may be quite emotionally affecting and give them a sense of spirituality and so forth. But there's no texture of connection through circles of three, 12 and 120 that reaches many of the people in the room. The good news is, all those people left during COVID and they're probably not coming back. So you now are back to your actual circle.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Just to clarify, are you saying you shouldn't have organizations above 120?

Andy Crouch:

No, you should have... You can, they just have to be structured in concentric circles that is... Or not concentric, it might not be the right word.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I know what you mean, like little clusters of 120.

Andy Crouch:

In cells, in clusters.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

Exactly. Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

I think you get above that and you are in the realm of consumption, not creation. So the difference between 120 and 1,200 is that you cannot get 1200 people to create anything. You can only get them to consume something. I mean, there's probably 120 people involved in creating one of my favorite current musicals, everybody's favorite current musical, Hamilton. Right? Every touring cast of Hamilton,

including set designers, orchestra and so forth, is probably about 120 people in every touring cast. They can actually create an evening of theater. You could have 1,200 people in the room. All those people can do is sing along to something that others are creating. You cannot get 1,200 people to make something together.

Andy Crouch:

So the crucial question for the church is, is this primarily an environment where people consume religious goods and services? In which case, you can scale that as big as you want. Or is this a community of people who are actually much more like traveling theater troops who are taking out into their neighborhoods, into their places of work, into all the different sort of circles of their lives, the drama of the gospel? And for them to actually effectively live that out, you've got to think of them like a group of creators, not a group of consumers. And then you're going to think in circles of three, 12, and 120 all the time.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, and for leaders who maybe are questioning that, I would encourage you to look at what Andy has to say on it. Also, check out Robin Dunbar. He makes the argument that in industry and also in the military, yes, there's 30,000 troops, but they're not a massive 30,000.

Andy Crouch:

Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

They've divisions and platoons.

Andy Crouch:

Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And they're all broken down into much smaller digestible pieces. And the same with factory, there's a whole industrial theory, don't think 19th century industrial, but modern, that you've got to break things down into departments, divisions, and teams, et cetera, for things to actually function, which is really interesting.

Andy Crouch:

The only things masses of people can do are extremely easy things. And the harder it is, the smaller the group that has to do it. And interestingly, the harder it is, the less it can be done by an individual either. So I sometimes use the example of climbing K2 or Everest or whatever you want of these, incredibly challenging mountain, in a sense. If you try to do that alone, you will absolutely die, literally die.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

If you try to do that with 200 people, you will die or somebody will die. The only way to do it, is with a very small group of people, three to 12. That's literally the only way anyone gets to the top of those mountains because it's one of the hardest things we do. Now, is following Jesus something really easy that you can just get everybody to do like you can get everybody to do the wave in a stadium? I can get 30,000 people to do the wave. Sure. No, I dare to say no, it's very hard. And so to do it, requires doing it together. You're not going to be able to do it alone, but you're not going to be able to do it in some mass group. You're going to do it with circles of trust.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. That's really profound. So I want to move to your new book, *The Life We're Looking For*. You argue, and I think we've touched on this a little bit but I'd like to go deeper, that we thought we wanted a personalized world. I don't know whether you make this reference in the book or not, but sometimes I love... So 15-year-old Carey, first of all, would've loved remote controls. That would be there. I remember lying on my bed and-

Andy Crouch:

What a dream.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Do you remember that? Did you predate remote controls? And it's like, "Oh, I got to get up and change the vinyl."

Andy Crouch:

Got up and change the channel. Yes, I think do remember that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Change the channel, change the record. How come the sides are only 20 minutes long? Come on.

Andy Crouch:

Change the record.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right? Vinyl's cool now again, but I would've dream to the remote control. And also, the limited budget. I think at my peak in college, I might have had 400 albums, record albums.

Andy Crouch:

Oh, yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And then it went into CDs and set tapes and the whole deal. And now, Spotify is great, But the algorithm is so annoying that it knows what I listened to yesterday. So when I go to what I think is a new playlist, it just gives me stuff that it thinks I want that I've already listened to. And I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no, no. You don't know me."

Andy Crouch:

Don't you have anything new?

Carey Nieuwhof:

I want a different stream. And it's like over personalized.

Andy Crouch:

Interesting, interesting.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So that's my little beef with an over personalized world.

Andy Crouch:

Interesting.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What do you mean by an over personalized world and a personalized world, and what's it doing to us, Andy?

Andy Crouch:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, so often when ize is added to anything, not always, but often, it sort of connotes a simulation of the real thing. So there's personal-

Carey Nieuwhof:

I missed that. What is added to anything?

Andy Crouch:

When you add ize, like I-Z-E.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, okay, personalize. Got it, got it, got it.

Andy Crouch:

When you add that suffix, personalize and-

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'm thinking like eyeballs.

Andy Crouch:

No, no, no. Sorry.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Got it.

Andy Crouch:

So we are persons. I mean, to be a human is to be a person.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah.

Andy Crouch:

And we are made for personal relationship. That is relationship between persons. But what we now have in our technological world is personalized, which is a word we use when it's not actually personal, but it feels personal. In other words, Spotify, there's no person on the other end saying, "Oh, Carey really loved that Ariana Grande song," which I'm sure is what you were thinking of, "and so we should serve him up this today." It's just an algorithm, but of course it puts your name on there. "Good morning, Carey, here's your playlist for today." Right? Or Siri will say, "Hi, Andy." You know? So it's this simulation of personal attention. And the reason we love it is, first of all, those algorithms do have some utility in sorting out what we like. I'm not sure they always know what we want. And I don't think they often know what's best for us, but they certainly know what we like, kind of what our superficial responses of attraction and distaste are. So they're sort of useful, but they also, in an impersonal world, they're very alluring like, "Oh, this is paying attention to me."

Andy Crouch:

My personal device, my iPhone, pays attention to me with a continuous presence that no person does. My wife does not pay nearly as untrammelled attention to me as my iPhone. My iPhone only exists to listen for my voice, "Hey, Siri." I shouldn't probably say that. It's probably going to wake up. Or for me to look at it and open it up with my face. It's always looking for me every moment. My children don't do that. My wife don't do that. You don't do that. And this is why a personalized world feels like, "Oh, finally, the world is responding to me as a person," but it's a simulation. It's not real. There's not a real face on the other side. So in some ways, the story of technology, especially in its recent digital forms, is the replacing of personal experience, where I would actually have a face-to-face relationship with another person with a really alluring simulation, which is personalization. And that's quite a bargain we've made. Let's put it that way.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Say more about the bargain because if you think about it, it's not just music. It's not just like, my Instagram is different than your Instagram. My newsfeed is different than your newsfeed. There's no more Dan Rather, Walter Cronkite, Peter Jennings telling us what we think we need.

Andy Crouch:

Ah, right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's all personalized, which gets into that, "I don't trust anybody unless you think exactly the way I think, see the world the way I see it, believe what I believe, vote the way I vote, dress the way I dress." Right?

Andy Crouch:

Yep.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So talk more about personalization.

Andy Crouch:

No, that's really good. Well, I think that's a really good layer of what happens, is it's actually more and more atomizing and individualizing. Your Spotify list is different from my Spotify list. There is no top 40 anymore. There's no shared experience at sort of broad levels. Another thing that happens I think is, it's actually quite rewarding to have these devices that pay such good attention to us, you might say. And we've all had the experience of being in the room with another person, someone whom we owe love and loyalty and attention, and just finding our attention kind of wandering off to that screen. Why? Because the screen is so responsive to me in a way that another person is not.

Andy Crouch:

And then a third thing is, there's no apparent vulnerability in personalization. I don't feel threatened, generally speaking, by this experience. I feel very safe and secure and known and provided for in a way. There's a shadow side where I start to realize, who is recording all the results of this algorithm and what do they know about me that I might not even know about myself? There's a little bit of surveillance capitalism threat there, but the initial presentation is, this is not vulnerable. Whereas, for me to be in relationship with you, even in a conversation like this, there's vulnerability, there's risk, there's uncertainty, there's the possibility of loss or breach of trust. Right?

Andy Crouch:

All of this adds up to a world that gets more and more personalized, but less and less personal, and then as so many people say, "More and more connected, but more and more lonely at the same time." I really think this is very close to the heart of the answer to the question, and my book was driven by this question, how did we become the most powerful, by many measures, the most affluent people in history, and the most lonely anxious and depressed people? I don't know if you can say in history, but strikingly lonely, anxious and depressed, given how beautiful our material conditions are and how good our devices are.

Andy Crouch:

And actually, as they've gotten better and better, the loneliness, anxious, anxiety and depression has just gotten more and more and more. It's because they're separating us from one other. They're undercutting the vulnerability that actually leads to resilience, the rupture and repair that leads to real trust. That doesn't have to happen with a device. But if you never practice that with another person, then you don't know if it can ever happen with another person. And so there's just this cycle of dependence on the personalized when what we're all dying for, kind of literally, is the personal.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's profound and that's the cost. There's more and more research. Jean Twenge, who we've had on the podcast from San Diego, University of San Diego I think it is, she has chronicled this for over a decade now, about the rise in teen and young person anxiety. And she ties it directly to the rise in technology. Do you see, in the research that you've done, this problem worsening from generation to generation, Andy?

Andy Crouch:

Well, in terms of the empirical research, I depend on scientists like Jean Twenge, so I don't have any independent data to add. First of all, it's very clear. The biblical word generation means everybody alive at a certain moment. And I think we are in a uniquely anxious and lonely and depressed generation people of every age and stage. But I think it is clearly affecting young people the most because they're the most exposed to it with the least buffering resources. You were formed, so was I, at a time when you had to get up to change the channel on the TV. Now, at the time, that seemed like a burden, but so much of the tragic comic irony of technology is, all these things we thought were burdens also were formative of a kind of resilience that gave us a way to handle suffering in the world.

Andy Crouch:

And when you are in an environment where everything operates on its own and you are never asked to take on any burdens, you lose resilience. And I think that's clearly happening for children and youth and emerging adults. It's a hockey stick. I mean, I'm sure you talked with Jean about this, this is not a little trend. It's a hockey stick in things like American Journal of Pediatrics, a couple years ago now, this study on poisonings among 10- to 12-year-old boys, which is literally not a category of self-harm until the 2010s and now is on the same hockey stick as every other thing. 10- to 12-year-old boys are poisoning themselves-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Self-poisoning or poisoning others?

Andy Crouch:

Yes, self-poisoning, intentionally poisoning with the intent to take their lives. This used to be a way that girls would commit suicide. And so it's been a factor for girls for longer, but now we have, out of the blue, 10 to 12-year-old boys who literally... You just never heard of a case of this. And now, there was this whole article in the AJP, documenting this hockey stick rise in that for boys and also an increase for girls. Just index after index. Something's really not working well for those who are at the most formative stages of their lives. And by the way, I don't actually think it's their technology use that's the biggest problem. I think it's their parents.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Ooh, say more about that.

Andy Crouch:

Well, we did do some research for my daughter's book, My Tech-Wise Life. And one of the questions we asked teenagers, we did this with Barna, with our friend Dave Kinnaman, and one of the questions we asked teenagers was, "If you could change one thing in your relationship with your parents, what would it be?" And the most common answer is, "I wish my parents would spend less time on their phones and more time talking to me."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh.

Andy Crouch:

So this is what the kids wish were different. So there's a lot of anxiety and maybe even a little bit of panic about teen device use or whatever. I'm much more concerned about adult device use, which is disrupting the ability and willingness of parents, especially during the vulnerable years of adolescence to stay engaged with their kids. Chris Smith has this really beautiful sort of sad, but beautiful picture that when kids hit adolescence, they send two messages to their parents all the time. And one is, "Come closer, come closer. I need you," and the other is, "Get away, get away. I hate you." Whereas previously in early childhood, the messages are just, "Come closer, come closer." But in adolescence, it's both. They both want some distance and they want more connection than they've ever wanted in their lives in some ways.

Andy Crouch:

But what Chris says is, parents tend to fixate on the aversive reaction, the negative reaction, and they pick up on that and they're like, "Oh, I'm not supposed to be involved in my kid's life anymore. I should back away." And they don't pick up on all the same... The same child is also sending you signal saying, "No, come closer. I need you right now. I need you to listen. I need you to understand what it's like to be me." And I think that's been a dynamic for parents for a long time, kind of since the invention of adolescence maybe. But now, the parent has a personalized device that never gives you that.

Andy Crouch:

It's very hard as a parent when that child once came running to you and they no longer come running to you. And there's a sense of grief and loss and even betrayal that we feel as our kids go through that normal adolescent distancing. But if I've got my device to comfort me, console me, distract me, and I can just tell myself, "Well, they want to be by themselves." It's this lack of attending at this critical age when in fact children need their parents more involved in their lives than ever, that the parents now have this thing constantly distracting them from the most important relationship, formative relationship that we could have, parent of child.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What are the ancient roots of our tech obsession?

Andy Crouch:

Well, yeah, I mean, it's super simple. It's magic, it's the dream of magic. It's the desire to have a kind of impersonal power that you can wield, ideally without risk, with a kind of endless ability to get things done with very little effort, effortless power. We've always had tools. Technology is not new in the sense that human beings have always figured out ways to get things done. But we had this dream for a long time that we couldn't get to come true, which was that the tools would start to operate on their own. So we had this dream of magical brooms that would sweep for us. Or Aristotle writes about, "Gosh, wouldn't it be amazing to have a harp that would play itself? You wouldn't have to have a slave. You wouldn't play the music. The thing would play its own on its own." And all this was very tied up with the dream of magic, of commanding the world and getting what we wanted with no exertion.

Andy Crouch:

And then we figured out some things about power sources and cybernetics, and we suddenly had Roombas that are like a magical broom. And we had Spotify that is like a magical harp that plays itself. And that dream, while it has some usefulness, and I'm not saying all those things are not useful in their own place, but I think that dream of magic is... The witness of the biblical tradition is, it's a bad idea. And

it's a false dream because it imagines that what it would be like God is to be just disburdened from really our bodies, our limitations, and just be able to act by thinking. And I think the Christian tradition has wisely said all along, "Very bad idea. You don't actually want that. And when you get it, you're not going to like it. It's going to be a lot less satisfying than you thought."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Underneath some of our conversation today is this idea of agency, so I've been thinking a lot about identity. You know?

Andy Crouch:

Uh-huh.

Carey Nieuwhof:

If you look at our identity, we can place it in a partisanship right wing, left wing, or progressive, or ultra conservative. Or you put your identity into who you are, your status, your position, et cetera. And I think a lot of that is the loss of our Christian identity, our identity of who we truly are in Christ. Yuval Harari, who you quote in your new book, he writes a lot about agency too. He and Tristan Harris and others are very, very concerned that humanity is right at the precipice of losing agency. And by agency, I mean the ability to think and act freely.

Andy Crouch:

Yes, exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

In other words, I made a decision and it wasn't the algorithm that told me how to vote or what to think or what to do. Is that something that concerns you? And if so, could you talk a little bit more about that agency? Do you think we're losing agency? Is that a concern?

Andy Crouch:

I do. And I think it's part of the irony of wanting to do magic because magic sounds like you'd have a lot of agency. If I had magical powers, I could just make stuff happen. Right? That would be awesome. But that's always predicated on a collapse of personhood, that is the dream of magic is the dream of impersonal power as I understand it. This is why when Dr. Frankenstein creates his monster, you may remember from that story that he creates this monster, and then the thing that drives Dr. Frankenstein crazy and causes him to drive the monster away is, the monster wants relationship. The monster, for one thing, wants a love, wants someone to love and wants to be in relationship with Dr. Frankenstein. He's like, "No, no, no. I didn't make you to be like a person. I made you to be a thing that would serve me and give me power."

Andy Crouch:

So magic is the dream of impersonal power. And the irony is, because that's a false dream, the more we have it, the less agency we actually have, the more we are enslaved to ultimately the principalities and powers that whisper in the ears of humanity. Wouldn't you like to do this without having to be a person? Wouldn't you like to be able to do things without having relationship? And I think this is very connected to the issue of identity because I'm meant to find out who I am through relationship with

you. It's as we are together. And I don't really mean on a podcast or on a video screen, the way we're doing this. I mean, we can only in so far as you and I have actually had this with real people like... What was her name? Annie, Jenny, or Jen Annie who died very slowly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I've lost the reference. Sorry.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, your person who really took a long time to die.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, Aunt Jenny. I'm sorry. That story. Yeah, Aunt Jenny.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

97-year-old Aunt Jenny.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Mm-hmm.

Andy Crouch:

You were actually with her in a formative way that has made you in a small way who you are. And we then bring that into this mediated relationship. But if we never had those experiences and if we just have personalization all the time, our identity becomes disconnected from real relationship. And it actually gives us less and less power, real power in the world. And juxtapose this with the Christian belief that God is Trinity, that when Jesus comes into the world, he does nothing without his father. He's always in relationship with his father. All of his power, it kind of looks magical to people around him. They're like, "Look, he can do miracles. He's got kind of an ability to change the world that we don't have."

Andy Crouch:

But Jesus' own account of it is, "This is not because I know some magical spells or because I can get the world." In fact, that's the promise of the devil in the temptations. Just say the words, throw yourself off the cliff, and it'll just have to happen. And he says, "Look, I don't do anything that I don't see my father doing." And the spirit is always binding us together in the love of the Trinity. So we are losing that interpersonal identity, which means we're losing our ability to really make durable difference in the world that matters, that contributes to the good of the world. And all of it's being replaced by simulations and by a growing sense that things are actually strangely more and more out of our control, even as we have more apparent power and control than human beings have ever had.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What are the habits or practices that you can adopt to ensure that you keep or reclaim some agency?

Andy Crouch:

I think Sabbath is the biggest one. The principle of Sabbath where on a regular basis, I actually think of a daily rhythm, a weekly rhythm, and for me, a yearly rhythm and actually an every seven years rhythm, if I can detach and disentangle myself from anything that promises me provisions, status, significance, not to mention magic and kind of effortless power, and for, let's say, one day a week, just be back in the world of my neighbors, my family, my body, the creation, not with all these layers. So I turn everything off that has a switch in our house, in our home on Sundays, because we don't have to work on Sundays like many pastors. But I think everybody needs a weekly rhythm where we turn this stuff off long enough to detox from it.

Andy Crouch:

And I will just tell you, the beautiful things had happen two thirds of the way into those days. Because the first third of any fast in a way is disorientation and distress. You're like, "I need my phone," or, "I need my device. I need my connection." And then there's this middle third, that's sort of emptiness and it's not clear, but anything's happening. But then around the third third, beautiful things start happening and you realize, "Oh, my life is a gift," or, "Oh, I'm really grieving this and I just need to weep about this," or whatever is going on. And it's real and it's personal and it's not at scale. It's just you with the people close to you and with God, and if you're really fortunate, a worshiping community that comes around you on a weekly basis and helps you bring that to God.

Andy Crouch:

I don't think anyone can survive in our world without a Sabbath practice. I just think it's the most important thing. And then a sabbatical practice, for me, every seven years, I quit my job and take six to nine months with very little agenda other than some rest, some pilgrimage. And some prayer about what's next. And that detaches me from the significance of the work I do, the status I have in a certain kind of public. I just think sabbaticals are essential, especially for leaders. Everybody really should get them, but leaders, I don't think survive without them.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How many sabbaticals have you taken now over the years?

Andy Crouch:

I believe my next one will be in 2023. Depending on how you count, I think it'll be my fifth. Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Andy Crouch:

Every seven years, and I'm 54. My first one was halfway through university. I took a year off kind of in the middle of an Ivy League university experience. I was like, "I think I should not do this school thing." I've been doing it since I was five years old. I'm really good at it. I get rewarded for it. And I will tell you, back then, gap years are more common now, but this was in the 1980s. Nobody did this, but it was life

changing. It was life changing to step out of that system I'd gotten so good at working and be in some places where I had no idea what I was doing and had to learn a lot of different things. And then every seven years roughly since then, I've managed to do that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. So... What? I'm just thinking about that. Give us an idea or two about how that changed your trajectory, take a sabbatical year.

Andy Crouch:

Oh, man. I mean, I can truly say, if I've made any valuable contribution to the world, and some days I wonder, but if I have, it has emerged from these sabbaticals, which is to say, in these times, I get new clarity about what the next really important thing is for me to do. So in 2015 was my last one. I turned all my devices off for all of lent. That was crazy. Even in 2015, that was very hard to do. I'm going to try to do it again in 2023.

Andy Crouch:

I came back. I turned off all the devices for that then. Around Easter, I went on a long pilgrimage, literally around the world. It was in many different kinds of places, everywhere from Cambodia to Italy, Florence on Easter Sunday, actually. And I came back with a clarity about what was going on in technology and a need to write about it. And three books, including the one with my daughter, have come out of that. That would not have happened if I hadn't had this total pause, both literally on the tech, but also this pause in my work life that just gave me time to get enough distance and enough kind of presence in mind to figure out what the devices were doing to me. And therefore, maybe what they were doing to the rest of us. So, that would be one example.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, that's fantastic. Practically speaking, I guess, those are either you save up for them or you have an employer who funds that.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah. I never have had... I think we may be putting in place a sabbatical policy at Praxis where I work now. But what I do is, I save just like we save for retirement. We have this idea in the West that you're going to have a season of life where you won't work, so you save money for that time. The problem is, we pile it all up at the end of our lives. All the rest is at the end of our lives. And seven years in a row is not seven times more restful than one year every seven. Right? So we've diverted our retirement savings to some extent. We do save for that season of life as well. But yeah, I've got a sabbatical fund. Every month I put money into it because I don't know that I'll have a paycheck. And I tell you, it's the healthiest thing. It's the healthiest thing you can do.

Andy Crouch:

Also, since we're talking to leaders, it's incredibly healthy for an organization because it forces organizational growth when we know the leader is going to be absent for longer than a single decision cycle. It's one thing to take two weeks off in the summer, but if the CEO is going to be gone for six months, that's long enough that we got to have some backup. And so you develop talent in a different

way when you know there's going to be this rhythm of presence and absence from the senior leadership.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Have you returned to some of the same organizations when you've been finished? Or is it always a new job?

Andy Crouch:

Mm-hmm.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah?

Andy Crouch:

It hasn't always been a new job, no. Two times I came back. Though the second time I came back and took on some very intensive leadership for a couple years, this was a Christianity Day, but then actually relatively quickly realized, "Oh, actually it's time for me to move on." So it has often coincided with changes, but sometimes it's just a good reset. And I come back to the same theoretical title with a different perspective of what I most need to be doing.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Mm-hmm. I think you're right. Clarity often comes in the detachment, in the removal from the everyday and the whirlwind. I mean, that's why, if you want to look at one of the most simple things, take an offsite, take a day away.

Andy Crouch:

Yeah, exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Go with your team. Your team rarely solves the problems it created in the same work environment that you created them. Hence, the value of the offsite.

Andy Crouch:

Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Let's fly into a different city.

Andy Crouch:

Exactly.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Let's have some different experiences.

Andy Crouch:

Right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And we'll solve problems from a fresh perspective. And I guess the same is true of life, not to mention all the rest.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Andy, this has been fascinating. So I just want to thank you so much for being on the podcast. I've appreciated your voice and your work, and have been really looking forward to this. It's a very savory conversation. So, tell us, the book is called, your latest and you've got a number, but The Life We're Looking For, available everywhere books are sold.

Andy Crouch:

I hope so.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But where can people find you these days? Yeah. You hope so. Right? That was the deal. That was the deal.

Andy Crouch:

Oh, well, I mean, I have a vest digital website, andy-crouch.com. But check out what's happening at Praxis, it's so encouraging. We're working with redemptive entrepreneurs in a beautiful way and more and more resources to help others pick up some of those ideas and apply them in their own setting. And that's at praxislabs.org, L-A-B-S like laboratories, praxislabs.org. Praxis is a really fun community to be part of right now.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Andy, myself and so many others are so grateful for you. Thank you so much for being here today.

Andy Crouch:

Thank you, Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, that's really fascinating. We kind of go in some philosophical territory on the podcast this summer. I'm enjoying that a lot. We've got John Eldredge up next. I'll tell you more about that, but make sure you check out the show notes. We got show notes for this. Go to careynieuwhof.com/episode503. We even have transcripts, so if you want to find something, they're so easily searchable. That's, again, careynieuwhof.com/episode503.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Want to thank our partners for this podcast. We choose them very carefully, so please check them out. Brushfire services 30,000 plus events every year. You can get a \$500 credit toward your first event with Brushfire by going to brushfire.com/carey. That's brushfire.com/carey. And by Leadr, engage and grow

your team with Leadr's people development software. Go to leadr.com, that's leadr.com, and use the promo code Carey for 20% off your first year.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Next episode, well, we're going to continue in this vein and talk to John Eldredge. He returns to the podcast to talk about the collective trauma we've been through, and he outlines, well, what I didn't know were actual signs of trauma. I'm like, "Are you kidding me?" So, here's an excerpt.

John Eldredge:

In your depleted condition, some heartache enters in. Infertility, the company collapses, betrayal by a friend, an affair by a spouse, heartache enters in. And in that moment, the enemy pounces to urge us to give up on God. You see, he's not good. He's not for you. He's not with you. And I am reading texts from people who have walked with God for 40 years, saying, "I think I'm done. I just don't think I can hang in there anymore. It's too disappointing. He doesn't seem to be coming through." And what they don't understand is that in their vulnerable condition, the enemy of their souls has swept in to cloud and poison their relationship with God.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's coming up. Also, a really powerful interview with Terry Crews, the actor. I've got Chris Bale. He did a really fascinating research project that I can't wait to get into your hands. Ramit Sethi, Rich Villodas is coming back, Brian Zahnd. Who else do we have? We've got Stephen M.R. Covey, Pat Lencioni, and so much more coming up on the podcast.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I just want to thank you for listening and for sharing this episode. If this meant something to you, please share it on the socials. If we see you, we will repost you. If you haven't subscribed, please subscribe and maybe tell a friend. I also want to give you something for free for listening. Text the word THRIVE to this number. Are you ready? 833-777-8558. That's 833-777-8558. It's also in the show notes. And I'm going to send you my Burnout Assessment.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's summer. You know what? So many leaders I know are just exhausted. It's almost like we got punched one too many times. We don't know what side is up anymore. And I will send you my free Burnout Assessment to see how you're really doing. I'm also going to send you something that I have used for over a decade called my Thrive Calendar. It is what I use to schedule my day to make sure I have margin, hobbies, family time. And so I can crush it at work. That's all yours for free, including some training videos. So these are the systems I personally use, I personally developed. Love to get them in your hands. So just text the word THRIVE to 833-77-7-8558. And it's in our show notes as well. But hey, I want you to thrive this summer. I want you to thrive this fall. I don't want you to be a casualty of leadership. So we're making that available to you for free.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Thank you so much for listening. Hey, now that you've listened to the end, have you checked out The Art Of Leadership Daily? Check it out with me and Joe Terrell. We go back into the archive and we pick different episodes. We have some fascinating ones every day, Monday to Friday, just a short bit of

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leadership that I think can make your day better. Hopefully we can meet each other there as well. Thank you so much for listening, and I hope our time together today has helped you thrive in life and leadership.