

Announcer:

The Art of Leadership Network.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof leadership Podcast. It's Carey here, and I hope our time together today helps you thrive in life and leadership. We are diving into some really cool conversations this summer on the podcast. I got Rich Villodas on this episode, more on that in a minute. I want to thank our partners for this episode. This episode is brought to you by He Gets Us. You can go to hegetsuspartners.com/carey, and sign up to play a role in the largest faith campaign in history. If your church is looking to benefit from that, go to hegetsuspartners.com/carey, and by Convoy of Hope, you can help the war victims around the world and in Ukraine, by going to convoyofhope.org/donate, that's convoyofhope.org/donate. Well, I invited Rich Villodas back to the podcast and we talk about, well, a bunch of stuff. The three waves of people who are leaving the church right now, why pastors keep failing, this is a subject I'm going to come back to again and again, because I'm aghast at the level of just collapse that seems to be happening to the church.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What gen Z and boomers want from a church and why they don't actually match, the next generation of pastors, and we're even going to talk about stress. So Rich is the Brooklyn-born lead pastor of New Life Fellowship, a large multiracial church with more than 75 countries represented in Elmhurst Queens. Rich holds a Masters of Divinity from Alliance Seminary. He's written a few books. His first book called The Deeply Formed Life exploded onto the scene and his latest is Good, Beautiful and Kind. So I think you're going to really enjoy this. If you did, shout out Rich on social and let him know. He's Rich Villodas, I follow him. He's a great follow.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You can shout me out, I'm Carey Nieuwhof on Instagram and CNieuwhof on most other platforms. So make sure you do that. And if you enjoy this episode, make sure you subscribe and leave a rating and review as well. Well, by now you may have seen an ad or heard about the, He Gets Us campaign. It's a national ad campaign that's changing perceptions of Jesus and you might be asking yourself, those are the black and white ads, right? You might be like, well, what's it all about? And is it a good thing? Or maybe even how you can get involved? Well, you can get involved. He Gets Us is backed by months of in depth research and was created to help people meet and relate to the actual Jesus of the Bible. It's got a budget in excess of \$100 million and that makes it the largest faith campaign in history.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What's different is people who respond to the campaign, get connected with local churches and they've got early successes like 31 million views on YouTube and so much else. So what happens is half a million people are visiting the He Gets Us website and you can get your church plugged in now to participate. So when people have questions, He Gets Us connects them with a local church. If you want to get connected and become a church partner, go to hegetsuspartners.com/carey. You'll get coaching and certification, Bible studies and info on how your church can connect. There are literally millions of people looking for answers if you'd like to connect with them, go to hegetsuspartners.com/carey and get your church involved today. And our friends at Convoy of Hope are helping all over the world, including America. When you see a tornado, when you see a flood, when you see a hurricane they're there. They're also still in Ukraine.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Convoy of Hope in Ukraine alone has served over 100,000 people, they're in eight neighboring countries to Ukraine as well. And when you donate to Convoy, you or your church, here's what happens, you end up sending food, hygiene, feminine supplies, baby supplies, medical supplies, blankets, bedding, clothing, and they know how to get through to the front lines so your donation doesn't get wasted. If your church is looking to partner, your company is looking to partner, you are looking to partner, visit convoyofhope.org/donate. That's convoyofhope.org/donate. And now my conversation with Rich Villodas. Rich, welcome back.

Rich Villodas:

Carey, so good to be back with you again.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Yeah. So I'd love to start with a check in. You wrote a book. When did that come out? When did *The Deeply Formed Life* come out?

Rich Villodas:

September of 2020.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. Great timing. Perfect timing. Great time to launch a book. right? And the hurricane in the last few years, obviously you were finished it long before the pandemic hit.

Rich Villodas:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's how publishing goes. How is your soul? And I'd really love to know what happened to your soul over the last couple of years.

Rich Villodas:

Yeah. I think like every other pastor and leader, I think the last couple of years I've been weary, honestly. I think the way I've tried to explain it is we're living in a CPR world, a world in which there's this convergence of COVID, political idolatry, at least in the United States and racial hostility. And so the convergence of these three things have made it hard to breathe. Our hearts are ailing and I think that in addition to the regular pressures of just life and leadership have been very challenging. Within the congregation that I pastor we've seen some significant shifts in terms of who calls New Life home these days. And so I have needed rhythms of friendship, seasons of rest and just ongoing inner work to navigate the terrain of the last few years. But God has been gracious and I'm experiencing lots of joy and peace, but it certainly has not been easy.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Can we talk about the people who left, because that is a huge theme. Here we are two and a half years into this whole thing that we're in. And when I just have conversations with church leaders in particular,

there's a lot of pain over the people who left. And I don't think there's a single church in America, or Canada or the Western world where everybody who was there is still there and some people left mad. Can you talk about that?

Rich Villodas:

It's funny because before our conversation here, I had a meeting with a congregant on Zoom and thankfully it was a good conversation. But she raised the issue, she was very disoriented around the shifts. She was noticing she's been at New Life for 18 years and she just had some questions and she was feeling disoriented around the people that she wasn't seeing anymore. And I think for me in our context, it came in three waves. In three waves. The first wave happened after the 2016 election, which just brought about lots of polarization and division. And I don't think I contributed well in that season because I just had my own particular ideas about who our church would be voting for and why. And I think I alienated some people on social media by some things I said, which was a good lesson for me, but that was the first wave where some started trickling out.

Rich Villodas:

The second wave was during the pandemic at the beginning of and middle point of 2020, where we have this pandemic, we have a racial protest going on and some folks were just wondering, how are we? Are we aligning ourselves ideologically, and theologically with organizations like Black Lives Matter? And then folks started leaving then. The third wave, at least in our context was after January 6th. And I preached a message right after January 6th, about our baptism, who do we belong to? Where's our allegiance to? It's to Jesus Christ. And I mentioned that what I am noticing is that instead of finding our allegiance in Jesus Christ, our baptism has been put in jeopardy by a number of things. And I named a few things. I named cable news discipleship. I named corrosive racism. I named charismatic prophecies and conspiracy theories. Well, that didn't go over too well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow.

Rich Villodas:

And so for some people in our church, they just, again, came to the conclusion that Rich is aligning, although I said Jesus probably 100 times in the sermon, it wasn't enough. And so there have been these waves of people coming and going. And then of course we have, everything has been so politicized for masks. We did a survey, Carey, multiple surveys, just where people are at, when are you ready to come back? And we did about three or four different surveys and it would be so funny to read the comments because right after each other, one person would say, "I will be comfortable when everyone has to wear masks." And then the comment right after that was, "I will come back when no one is wearing masks." Well, this is where we're at. So part of it, I just have to recognize I'm not going to be able to please everyone. And as the leader, if I'm pleasing everyone, I'm probably not leading. But those have been some of the trends that I've seen over the last few years.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. And we're getting a little bit of distance on it now. Not that the polarization has magically gone away or anything like that, but do you mind sharing what happens to you on the inside? Wave one, wave two, wave three, what happens to Rich?

Rich Villodas:

Yeah, I get very flooded, and I have difficulty sleeping. Whenever I find myself experiencing this level of tension, I feel it in my body first, which is why at New Life, we often say that the body is a major profit, not a minor profit. That our bodies speak loud. And I know something's going on when I can't catch a satisfying breath. I think that's when anxiety is getting the best of me. And so first of all, that's what's happening in me. My body's feeling the weight of this anxiety, but what I've tried to do beyond just the ongoing rhythm of friendships that have sustained me over the past five, six years, and regular meetings with other pastors along those lines, I have had to do significant inventory. So for example, after the January 6th message I preached, there was a significant member of our community who wanted to have a meeting because he wanted to raise some issues.

Rich Villodas:

And I started feeling, oh, and the person said, "Can we have a two hour meeting?" I'm thinking, can anything good come out of a two hour Zoom meeting? And I said, "Can we make it 90 minutes instead?" And he said, "Fine." And I realized I was so anxious because this is someone I really respect. This is someone who's been a pillar of our church and I'm just not doing well. And so I remember walking down the block in Queens Boulevard in Queens and had my journal and I began to identify and really ask God to help me. What are the lies that I'm believing about myself and about leadership at this moment? And Carey, I came across with six different messages that were deeply lodged in my soul that for whatever reason had not been named prior.

Rich Villodas:

And I walked into that meeting after spending about an hour, hour and a half, reflecting on these questions and seeing the lies for what they were that I was able to be fully present in that meeting. And no, my breathing did not return, the satisfying breath did not return at that moment, probably returned about a week later where my body got really acclimated again. But that's where I typically go. And I think here's what's happened in me. As I've done those practices, it's not that I don't feel it anymore, but I don't go as deep in the hole as I used to. And it doesn't take me as long to come out of it as it used to. And so it's not that I'm a robot, not feeling any kind of anxiety. I'm still feeling it in my body, but it doesn't last as long as it used to. That's the difference?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Do you mind sharing one or two of those lies?

Rich Villodas:

Absolutely. And you know what, I'll do even better. I'll pull up, because I wrote it down, my journal here.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Cool. Okay.

Rich Villodas:

On lies that I was believing. So these messages that I was believing, and so I'll just pull that up here and maybe, Carey if you want to just edit it here so that it just comes across maybe a little smoother.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh, this is real time. This is how real conversations happen. This is lunch. This is dinner. This is sitting around a fire with a friend. And so I'm good with no edit if you are.

Rich Villodas:

All right. So, here it is. So I'll put together, I just pulled it up right now. So the lies that I was believing about myself here, and alright, here it is here, because they were like seven of these lies and, okay. So the first one was this. When people disagree with me, it means I'm a bad leader. Number two, if congregants and I are not on the same page, I'm doing something wrong as a leader. Number three, I'm causing division by bringing up delicate issues. Number four, things will end in the worst way possible, and it will all be my fault. Number five, I need others to like me for me to be okay.

Rich Villodas:

Six, I need others to agree with me for me to be okay. And then seven, people who leave New Life expose my deficiencies in leadership. And I sat with those seven messages deeply lodged in my soul and began to one by one, ask the Lord for some perspective. And I'll tell you what, that was so deeply lodged in my soul and I was able to name them. Something shifted in me. That I was able to be truly present with this person, and from that point on, I think it's just helped me to navigate some difficult conversations.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Thank you so much for sharing that. You've talked about, I haven't read it yet, my wife has, but The Body Keeps The Score. Millions of people have read that book. You were saying the body is a major profit. I think there's a lot of truth to that. And as I get older, I'm spending more and more time listening to my body, paying attention, trying to care for my body well, or better. What symptoms or signs do you look for in your body for health or own health?

Rich Villodas:

Yeah, I think in my case, it begins with, again, the satisfying breath for me. I just know if I can't catch that breath there at any time that I need it, that there's something just beneath the surface.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So that simple, literally breathe in, breathe out. How are you?

Rich Villodas:

For other people it might, and breath is just such an important part of...

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, without it, we're done aren't we? Yeah. Good point.

Rich Villodas:

So I also know, physically I would have these physical, whether my fingers would get these allergic reactions often to stress. And so whenever they would come up just a level of dryness on my fingers and I would go to it, I remember seeing my doctor and one of the questions was, are you stressed? And I say, "Yeah, of course I am. But what does that have to do with this on my hands?" And she said, "Well, it has to do a lot with it." And so our bodies are different or the chemistry of our bodies' different, but for me

my fingers, having these reactions, satisfying breath, racing heart, sleepless, having difficulty sleeping at night, those have been some of the symptoms for me that, you know what, I better pay attention to my soul and invite some others into this to help me just navigate what's happening in my body.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think that's so wise. When I think back over my leadership, there are times it doesn't happen very often, but I remember one season where I broke out in a whole body rash, my whole torso. Chest and stomach were red, looked like I had not chicken pox, but some kind of tropical disease. And it was just stress. We were going through staff transition at the time, which is always the worst for me. I think that's really, really important. I'd love to, shifting gears a little bit, talk about what I call the rot or decay at the center of the church. I honestly wish we had one or two scandals revealed and that was it. Everybody else was healthy. Nobody got abused. Nobody got hurt, but we are dealing with something I just thought we'd never see the day of which is scandal after scandal. And I'm not upset that they're being brought to light. I'm just upset that so much rot seems to be at the core of Christian leadership or darkness where there should be light. What are your thoughts on the season we're in, in the Western church these days?

Rich Villodas:

Yeah. Like you, Carey, I'm burdened on what's happening in the church and then what's happening in the world. It was the case where in public worship on Sundays after our singing portion, we typically have a pastoral prayer about something that's happening in our nation in our world. And maybe once every four to five weeks, something would happen that we would pray. It seems like every week we're praying for something new that's happening in our nation, in our world, the intensity of it. And I think the same applies to what's happening in the church as well. The rot, what we're seeing in terms of leadership. And so I'm so burdened by it. And without trying to oversimplify too much, I think we have seen how unwell Christian leadership is for, I can think at least three or four different reasons that I reflect on, on a regular basis.

Rich Villodas:

The first is that I think we have leaders who have not seen their personal formation as their primary task, that so many leaders have never engaged in sincere confrontation with themselves. And so when I became the lead pastor at New Life fellowship, I remember my predecessor, Pete Scazzero, saying, "We have to change your job description to make it more succinct in that the first line of your job description is for you to have a life with God. That's the first task, not to cast good vision, not to preach good sermons." And so on my job description is written, have an in our language here, a contemplative life with God that my life is marked by prayer, examination. So that's the first thing.

Rich Villodas:

I don't know if the leaders we're seeing have really taken their personal formation as their primary task. Secondly, I would say that I think we've adopted a very worldly approach to leadership. Always believing that bigger is better, that increasing and influence is always a good thing, the idolatry of money and success. And so I think it's a very worldly approach to leadership. Thirdly, I'd say we haven't looked to Jesus as the model of leadership. When I think of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. Henri Nouwen has written a lot about this, where he says, the three temptations that Jesus faces after he gets baptized is the temptation to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful.

Rich Villodas:

And every time Jesus says, "No, I'm not going to turn this stone into bread." That's what Nouwen says is relevant. "I'm not going to jump from the temple and have angels catch me." That's an act of being spectacular. "And I'm not going to bow at your feet, so I can maintain power and have all power." And so the way of Jesus has resisted the spectacular way, the powerful way and the relevant way, in the most crass way of understanding that term. And so I think, I don't know if Jesus has been truly our model. And then lastly, what comes to mind is, I don't know if leaders have taken seriously sin and powers and principalities as it finds themselves in larger institutions.

Rich Villodas:

And so I remember when I wrote my first book, *To Deeply Form Life*, I asked my predecessor Pete Scazzero to give me some words of encouragement and words of advice, and what he said to me angered me so much because he gave me everything that I wasn't asking for. And so basically the third sentence he said to me was this, "Rich, if you do this, if you write this book, I want to tell you your soul is in danger." And so I'm like, "Pete, this is not what I was asking for."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. It's like, write a really good introduction, Rich, here's some three keys to a great introduction, right?

Rich Villodas:

That's what I was looking for. He said, "Your soul is in danger." And I thought, he says, "you're going to be involved now with institutional power in the publishing world, in the larger world, as your name gets more out there." And so for about 30 minutes, he just told me why my soul was in danger. And I wrote down so many notes from that conversation because what I think I learned in that was I need to take seriously the reality of sin as it is manifested in larger institutions. And so when that's not the case, I think when we are not mind... and as Christians, we have a lexicon for sin. We have a lexicon for the larger spiritual realities in our world. We should be the first ones to say, whoa, our soul might be in danger here. So I think the rot flows out of at least some of these ideas that I've been thinking about.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. So looking back on it, where, and how was Pete right?

Rich Villodas:

Well, he was right in a few ways. One, he said to me, "you're going to be very tempted to now use your platform at New Life to further your own brand." And that was one of the first things he said, "You're going to be very tempted now to not pass for these people, but to now leverage them for your own purposes." And you know what, he's absolutely right. That's been a very real temptation in my soul and I've had to work really hard to do counter instinctual things, to make sure I am rooted within a smaller community to make sure I'm spending time with people who cannot further so-called my influence and my brand. And so he's been right along those lines. He's also been right in that at the end of that conversation, his parting thoughts to me after 45 minutes of your soul is in danger, he said to me, "And you know what, Rich, your book is going to do really well, and it's going to help a lot of people."

Rich Villodas:

And then he just left the room, and I was like, "Thanks." You could have started with that, but you didn't, and I've learned that because of the level of now, let me just say what it is, just influence that I have that I didn't have before the book, there are a lot of temptations out there that I didn't have before to be spectacular, to be powerful, to be relevant. And I think everything he said, and I have about four pages of notes, because he experienced it himself. So he was really speaking out of a place of firsthand experience, not theory. So the seduction to power is very real.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yes, it is. So let's play the other argument, and you have gifts of writing and obviously you've been granted a certain amount of influence as a result of your ministry, but also your book, and this new one that we'll talk about before we wrap up today. So the alternative is, Rich is worried about his soul. He doesn't write a book, he doesn't make a contribution to the wider community. You pull yourself off the speaking circuit, you withdraw yourself from social media and you go about the meager anonymous job of pastoring a local church in New York City, which could have tremendous impact, not only for this generation, but future generations.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Is that more faithful? What I'm trying to ask, because I'm in the same boat you are, right, similar. It's like, there's a lot of influence these days and I'm having a really interesting dialogue with a young 20 something leader who's like, I think I'm pulling back from all this. And I'm like, it's a really interesting conversation. Should everybody just say, hey, we're killing the publishing industry. We're done, we're withdrawing from social media and we're becoming the new monastic movement. What is the answer?

Rich Villodas:

Yeah. And monasticism is something that has formed me deeply. As a matter of fact, our first M at our church, we have these five Ms is monastic. And so it's something that I've been really formed by. I think that varies from person to person and some people might feel called to that and I would not argue with them or try to convince them otherwise if they sense that was what they were called to do pulling back in that truly monastic way. But for me, I think it's a matter of more of, to what degree is my influence being protected and guarded by a larger structure and system of relationships around me? And so in my case, for example, I met with our board to talk about the maximum number of speaking engagements I can do in a given year.

Rich Villodas:

And that was very clearly defined and negotiated a little bit. And so that was very important. I know some people that do an enormous amount of public speaking that I don't know how they're able to pastor a church. I want to pastor a church at the same time I sense that God has called me to serve people outside of our local community. And so having a board, having a very strong wife, having a collection of friends that have really helped me to steward where I'm at, for me, it has been the response. It's not a matter of, it's either all in, acting like a crazy person or all out, acting like a monk.

Rich Villodas:

How in the world can I steward what I believe God has entrusted to me in ways that are doing my soul good? I have weekly Sabbaths, I take good vacations. I have sabbaticals, I have good rhythms, but more than that, I think I have a pretty strong structure around me, primarily in the form of my spouse, our

elders, and a small group of friends that have helped me to navigate some of this influence and increased impact that I'm having in the world.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. And conversely, if we all retract to private life, we don't have Henri Nouwen and we don't get Thomas Merton. We don't get Martin Luther King Jr. We don't get any of that. Right?

Rich Villodas:

Yeah. Absolutely. And what's interesting about Thomas Merton is, and I'm a big fan of Merton, I've read so much of his books, is for a monk, he was doing quite a lot of traveling himself. And so he was writing a lot and traveling. So not all monks are just cloistered within the monastic walls, praying and writing. Some of them have traveled extensively like Merton has or had.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. I think my favorite Henri Nouwen book is The Genesee Diary. Almost nobody knows that book, but I think it was his first or one of his first. And it's literally his diary from six or so months in upstate New York, just upstate from you in Genesee county. He's at this monastery, and he's in the process of being pulled into this wider world of speaking and teaching and writing. And you basically see him wrestling for his soul in the pages of the diary. It's fascinating. I think I'm going to read it again this summer. It's a reread for me, but...

Rich Villodas:

Yeah. And it might have been that book or another one of his journals where he writes about two ministries that we need, that we need a ministry of presence and we need a ministry of absence, that leaders need two of those. And, unless we are holding those two things together, there are times where I'm called to be present on social media in other places and there are times I'm called to be absent. But we need that both of those words to help us navigate the increased amount of influence, power, whatever you want to call it, that can come our way.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's funny you mentioned institutions. And the church sometimes, particularly at a certain size starts to feel like one, but there's almost a machine that needs to be fed. Right? You're supposed to write a book every two years. You're supposed to speak at X number of conferences. And every once in a while, it's really wonderful to, well regularly unplug from the machine. Oh, wow.

Rich Villodas:

Absolutely.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So helpful. I'd love to take it here. You look at the new Exodus from church. So some of your people have left. Some of them went to other churches. Some of them just went nowhere, right? I'm going to do individual Christianity for now or online exclusively, but not in community. What do you see as behind the new Exodus? Because I think most churches are down 20 to 50% still in mid 2022.

Rich Villodas:

A few things come to mind. First thing I'd say is I think there's a number of people who have exited because of poor leadership, because of the stories of abuse, the lack of integrity. And so in some respect, they're not returning because of the failure of discipleship and leadership information among leaders and institutions. And so I think that's one part of it. I think on another level, it's a failure of discipleship in that our understanding of the church has been so myopic and lacking theological and sociological depth. And so, for example, when the church is seen as something you go to as an event, as a service, it's treated very much like how we treat Broadway in New York. For a couple of years, I went to my first Broadway show in over three years just in May for our daughter's birthday.

Rich Villodas:

While I love Broadway. My wife and I love to take in shows, but my soul was not like it's trembling because I haven't been to a Broadway show. Now when I went there, it was wonderful. But I think church is often seen as just another show that it's good to go to when you can, but if you don't go to it, it's all good. And I think part of that has been our theological formation around what is the church and what does it mean to belong to people? And then additionally, I think the Exodus has happened because quite frankly, many Christians have understood faith through the lens of cultural values like individualism, consumerism, comfort, the frenetic pace of life. Easter of 2022, it was interesting because we saw so many new people coming to our church, and then so many people I haven't seen in two years come to the church.

Rich Villodas:

And so I started asking the people that I haven't seen in two years go, where you been? And I appreciated how candid some of them were where they said, "It's pretty nice to go to church in my pajamas. It's pretty nice to just have my coffee on my sofa and all that." And I'm thinking, well, I think this is a problem of discipleship here of how are we seeing our engagement with the body of Christ. And so I think on some level it is people leaving because of the failure of leadership. On another, it's just a failure of understanding what the church is from a theological and sociological perspective. And then another is, I think lots of folks have been discipled by cultural values rather than kingdom values. And I think that led to all kinds of people exiting and not returning. So I think it's quite multilayered.

Carey Nieuwhof:

The story you're hinting at is a story I'm hearing anecdotally from almost everybody I talked to, I haven't seen good data on it, mid 2022, but it seems to be that there's a wave or waves of people who left. But it's not just, I had 100 people, 50 left so now there's 50, maybe there's 70, but there's 20 new people, or 200 new people or 2000 new people depending on your multiplier. And it's really interesting, any sense whether there's a whole new generation of people coming in or is that just transfer growth, do you have a sense of where the new folks are coming from or why they're coming?

Rich Villodas:

It's hard to really... I can answer for my context in Queens and New York city. And so this is what I've seen anecdotally. I've seen many younger people coming to our church, in our context because they have seen the integration that they were hoping for in terms of how the gospel connects to some of the larger cultural issues of our day. And I think some of the folks that have left have had a hard time with how the gospel intersects with some of these realities of our day. And so younger folks I think, are coming to New Life now because they've heard me talk about how we're navigating through elections and race and sexuality and all these other things.

Rich Villodas:

And they're going, "Oh, okay. I think this is a place I want to be at that's helping me to see how the gospel connects to these realities." So that's been my understanding or at least what I've seen in my context, whereas the people who have not returned, I think are people that have seen the gospel more in a vertical way without all the horizontal dynamics that the gospel has implications for. So that's what I've seen in my context here.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, that's an interesting spin too, on younger millennials and gen Z who seem to want to know, where do you stand on everything from climate change to sexuality, they want a point of view. And it's interesting because that same analysis you might provide would be a turnoff to a boomer or someone who's an older gen Xer.

Rich Villodas:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof:

A very interesting take.

Rich Villodas:

And it has its gifts and it has its shadow side. So the gift is...

Carey Nieuwhof:

Tell us about the shadow... okay, gift and shadow side. Yeah.

Rich Villodas:

The gift is, we are being really thoughtful about integration and we want to see how the gospel and the message of Christianity applies to all aspects of life. The problem then becomes when some of the issues that might not necessarily be matters of essentials, maybe they're secondary issues to life and faith, critically important, but not to the degree that we're just going to, I'm out of this church now. And I think with the emerging generation, listen, my daughter, she's 13 years old. She rebukes me every time I go in the car and drives. She goes, dad, you're killing the environment. I'm thinking, do you want to eat or not? And so I think she has this passion for justice and the environment and all that, but I think if not careful, the shadow side is, I will now line up with anyone who sees everything the way I see it. And if you don't see everything the way I see it, there's something wrong with you. And I think that's, in many respects, where we're at as a society.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, and there are moments where the Christian narrative more than a few of them, is divergent from the dominant cultural narrative, which a younger adult may have embraced, and there's nuance behind that. And we're certainly not necessarily always the opposite, but that's a good description of that. There seems to be a generation and I watch this with admiration, yourself, John Mark Comer, your friend, Jon Tyson, Sharon Hodde Miller and others. And that's just a partial list of leaders around the same age and stage who seem to be taking a very different approach than maybe the people whose ministries you inherited would have. I'm not talking specifically about Pete, I'm just saying the previous

generation of pastors. I would love to know, what are you seeing in this generation, your generation of pastors that might be different from their predecessors?

Rich Villodas:

Yeah. I think a couple things, one, I think we are seeing increasingly a generation of pastors who are interested in what I just talked about, profound integration. And to talk about the ways that the gospel connects with some of the larger cultural realities of our day. And so I think we're seeing more pastors who are becoming fluent in that, recognizing the need for that in this missional moment. I also think we're seeing a generation of pastors who have taken seriously the inner life, our mental health, the effects of trauma, the call to justice. And so in short, I think, and I don't want to be disparaging about previous generations, that's the last thing I want to do, but I think there are some pendulum swings from generation to generation.

Rich Villodas:

And whereas previous generations didn't have maybe the vocabulary to talk about mental health, the vocabulary to talk about integration in the way that is increasingly being heard today. I think generations of pastors today are providing more of that, which is very encouraging because I think the gospel is not just for a part of our lives or our spiritual life. I think that the gospel's for our entire life. And so I think what we're getting more at is a more holistic kind of pastor that's trying to integrate the gospel in various sectors of human society and human life.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, we need that badly. You wrote your first book, *The Deeply Formed Life*, came out a couple years ago, and it was really a reaction against shallow spirituality, shallow Christianity that didn't lead people anywhere good, even whether they left the church or not. Your new book is called *Good, Beautiful and Kind*, and I'm curious as to why you wrote this one, what is it a reaction against or an advocate for?

Rich Villodas:

Yeah, the title, *Good and Beautiful and Kind*, comes from a poem from Langston Hughes, the African American poet. And he wrote a poem called *Tired*, which I think a lot of us can feel. And here's the poem. He said, "I'm so tired of waiting, aren't you for the world to become good and beautiful and kind. Let us take a knife and cut the world in two and see what worms are eating at the rind." And I remember reading that poem a number of years ago and returning to it. And I thought, this poem really gets at what's happening. And I think the angst and the longing that people have, we're longing for a good and beautiful and kind life. And yet there are some worms that are really inhibiting us from that. So let's take a knife, and let's cut the world in two.

Rich Villodas:

And that language is not about division, it's more about depth. We don't need another knife to cut the world in two to keep people over here and over there, what he's getting at is more of a diagnostic approach. How can we identify the worms that are eating away at this kind of life? And so, as I thought about the world we're in, the level of hostility, divisiveness, polarization, the lack of the capacity to hold space with one another, what are the worms that are eating away at our lives that's keeping us from the good and beautiful and kind life that the gospel offers us in Jesus? And so that was really the impetus which flows out of my life as a pastor. When I wrote *The Deeply Formed Life*, I wrote it primarily as a pastoral document.

Rich Villodas:

Now I'm grateful that it has gone beyond our congregational context to reach other people, but I write primarily as a pastor, when I think about the people leaving our church. When I think about the people who are having a hard time holding space with one another, when I think about the level of pain we're seeing for me, that's why I wrote the book. And the poem from Hughes really summarizes the book really in some good ways.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, you raise a lot of issues in it. You talk about our failure to love, the paucity that passes for prayer, but you also talk about the three stages of relationships. I'd love to do a double click on that one. Can you explain them? It was really... sometimes you see a framework and you're like, oh yeah, that's exactly what that is, but I never thought of it that way.

Rich Villodas:

Yeah. I've tried to use some fresh language to get at an ancient sociological reality. And so three stages of relationships, this is how I see it. I see that there's, what's called the heavenly stage, the hellish stage, and the holding detention stage. And so, the heavenly stage is I could tell when there's a new person who comes to our church, how do I know? Because they talk so glowingly about everything.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You're the best pastor I've ever had. You're the best preacher I've ever heard.

Rich Villodas:

I'm the only pastor they ever had. You're the best pastor. Wow. The people are so kind and everyone is so welcoming, and this is so wonderful. And I go, how long have you been coming here? It's been less than a month. Right? Because everything is just so heavenly. And this happens in romantic relationships as well. I meet people who just, what a man, how long have you known him? Just a week. I don't know his last name, but wow. What an amazing guy he is. I'm thinking, well, you're in that heavenly stage. And it is at this stage where I think it's natural. I think it's normal. But if we're not careful, we find ourselves being quite disillusioned because inevitably we're going to bump up against conflict.

Rich Villodas:

We're going to bump up against someone seeing the world very differently than we do. And when we come into a relationship or to a church, into a job with that idealistic lens, now everything that comes against that is seen in extremes. And so it goes very quickly from heavenly to hellish, where people are no longer angels, but now everyone is demons, and people are demonized now. And I think at that point, this is when people leave the church. This is when people leave the job. This is when people leave the relationship because they think often if it's not heavenly all the time, something is wrong with this place here. Something's wrong with this relationship, as opposed to no, it is quite normal to be experiencing all these things. So that holding the tension stage is the reality that we're not angels, but we're not demons either.

Rich Villodas:

We're somewhere in between. And this place is not heaven, neither is it hell, but it's somewhere in between. And the holding detention stages, trying to name the idealism, the romanticizing that often

gets in the way of flesh and blood real community, that there's problems everywhere. And I'm not talking about abuse. I'm not talking about the extremes of it, but everywhere we go, we're going to bump up against some challenges. So those three stages have helped me to, at least for the people that I've led, normalize the different seasons within relationships and community.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I love that you talk about forgiveness because I think in our current culture, cancel culture equals zero forgiveness. I thought Douglas Murray did a fantastic job talking about that in his book, *The Madness of Crowds*, and you address it as well. What is missing in cancel culture? There's just so much, and then how do we reclaim forgiveness?

Rich Villodas:

Yeah. What's missing in a culture that cancels, and in some ways, I see there's connection and in some ways I see some difference here because my first response to a cancel culture would not necessarily be to go towards forgiveness first. I think what's happened is, what would it be? I think more than anything, it is the tendency for people not to enter into the space of others, the inability to be hospitable. There was a guy who wrote a book called *Community*, the name is slipping me, a secular book. And he said, "Hospitality is not just about welcoming strange people, but often also welcoming the strange ideas that they bring with them." And that's hospitality as well.

Rich Villodas:

And I think we've come to a place where there's very little room for people that don't see the world as I do. And so we're very quick to dismiss if they don't align theologically, ideologically, politically. And so I think what's required is the capacity to be humble, the capacity to be self critical, the capacity to be curious. I'll give you an example, Carey. The fall of 2020, we had, I don't know if you recall, there was an election between a guy named Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Okay.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I remember that, vague memory.

Rich Villodas:

And so four weeks before the election, one of our pastors sent me an email, 10:00 PM, and I decided to open it up at 10:00 PM, which is always a bad leadership move.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Bad idea.

Rich Villodas:

And so I open up the email and the pastor said, "Rich, I have a great idea. What if we had this Zoom webinar where we can have two people from our congregation, one voting for Trump, one voting for Biden. Let's have them in conversation with each other to share why they're voting for either candidate." And with great faith and courage, I said, "We're never going to do that. Are you crazy?" And she said, "Aren't we the emotionally healthy church?" That was when Pete was leading this church. That's different here. And so she came back to me and pressed me a little bit further. And she said, "What if we got two elders of our church to do it?" I said, "Even worse."

Rich Villodas:

So after a while, I said yes, and a couple of weeks later, we had it, 200 people showed up. And what I discovered from the two elders and the moderator was this profound sense of curiosity. And I don't want to lump everything into our world with the curiosity will solve everything because truthfully it won't. But I do think there is a level of curiosity that's just so missing from our world.

Rich Villodas:

And so this is what I was hearing in that conversation. I was just observing. I wasn't moderating, I was observing. I was hearing questions like, what are your deep fears around this issue? And why are you thinking about voting in this way? As opposed to, you're voting for who? You know what, you're never coming over for dinner. And so on that level, I just saw a level of curiosity and humility that I think goes a very long way in our culture that tends to cancel very rapidly, particularly on social media. And I think that gets at a large sociological reality. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a book called Moral Man, Immoral Society. A number of years ago, where he said he was basically making the claim that when we're alone, we have a level of morality. That's actually pretty good.

Rich Villodas:

But when we get in groups, good people that typically would be quite moral, something happens to them. And I think we see it in middle school playgrounds. We see it at political conventions. We see it on social media. And so on social media, there's a level of animus that now multiplies because of the nature of that space. The de-personalized nature of that space, the dehumanizing nature of that space. And so I think in some ways, the cancel culture that we see in our world needs to be met with curiosity, but to your point regarding forgiveness, forgiveness is so layered. And, what I write in the book, there was a guy named Matthew Linn and Sheila Linn, they wrote a book called Don't Forgive Too Soon. And I found their book to be so helpful to navigate the tensions of forgiveness, because I think as Christians, we often hear, you need to forgive and forget and forgive immediately.

Rich Villodas:

And I think what often happens is when we live in that way, we have what I call the resentment of forgiveness. That we forgive, but we're not doing it from a place of depth. We're not doing it from a place of reflection. And so what Matthew Linn and Sheila Linn do is they connect the stages of, they call five stages of forgiveness, and they connect it to the five stages of dying, that there's denial, there's anger, there's bargaining, there's depression, there's acceptance. And I just wonder in a world that doesn't know how to forgive, the response that is not greater willpower to forgive even better, I think it's better language to nuance forgiveness, to recognize the anger, to recognize the hurt and to then forgive out of a deeper place, a deeper reflective place, as opposed to, I just have to forgive because that's the Christian thing to do.

Rich Villodas:

I think a lot of people forgive because that's the Christian thing to do, but they're not giving thoughts to their forgiveness. And so, as a result, there's something still lodged in their heart that's going to become a greater weight and burden and barrier to actually truly loving well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I really appreciate that analysis. What are you worried about for the future and what do you hope for the future? What gives you hope for the future? Well, we'll start with what you're worried about, if anything.

Rich Villodas:

I'm worried about a lot.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I know, I am. I am for sure.

Rich Villodas:

I'm worried about a lot of things. I'm worried that, I've just talked with the church, that the church does not have the ability to live with the tensions that are before us. I think in one of our previous conversations, Carey, I've talked about differentiation, the ability to remain close to God, close to myself, and close to others in times of high anxiety and resisting the polar opposite pull of cutting people off or being enmeshed into them. And I think because of our lack of the capacity to be differentiated in that way, what we're seeing is the perpetuation of fractured lives and fractured relationships. And so how do we hold space well with one another? I'm very worried about that. I'm also worried about the lack of theological integration, as we think about large issues like race and sexuality and politics and justice.

Rich Villodas:

There is a way that the church is engaging it that can either be informed by a robust theological framework and biblical framework, or just be swayed by the cultural forces of our day. And so I'm afraid for a generation that's coming that's not thinking through these issues theologically, deeply theologically, and engaging from that place and are being swept within the cultural narratives of, I'm supposed to think this way about this topic, because that's what culture says, as opposed to, how can I... I'm not talking about proof texting. I'm not talking about, here's a Bible verse for that. I'm talking about a robust theological understanding about what it means to be human, what it means to engage in the world. And so I'm worried that the church is not equipped for that task. So probably those are the two things that worry me about the future.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. I share that, and to our earlier conversation that's one of the reasons I'm glad that you're not cloistered up in some basement, but that you're writing and contributing. Leave us with a word of hope. What are you most hopeful for as you look into the future?

Rich Villodas:

I am most hopeful, this is going to sound so pastor cliché here. But I'm hopeful about Jesus Christ, Carey. And I think about what missiologist Lesslie Newbigin said, and I quoted every single Easter. He says, "I'm neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead." That's his statement. And when I look at the world, it's very easy in some ways to be pessimistic. And in some ways it can be easy to be optimistic about some positive things that we're seeing. But I'm neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. And so I'm hopeful that Jesus cares about this world and

this church much more than anyone else. And that Christ is committed to seeing the church and the world as a whole flourish. And so that's my hope for the future.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So well said, Rich, thank you. Where can people find you these days online?

Rich Villodas:

Yeah. On social media, which I'm usually testing out a lot of my thoughts for sermons and articles and books. It's just @richvillodas at Twitter and on Instagram. And then if they want to learn more about writing projects such as Good and Beautiful and Kind, they can go to richvillodas.com.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Awesome. And the book comes out when?

Rich Villodas:

July 12th, 2022, and very excited about it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Rich, thank you for contributing to the wider landscape. Thanks for staying grounded. And thanks for really thought provoking conversation. This will be a re-listen for me several times. Thank you.

Rich Villodas:

Thanks so much, Carey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I always enjoy talking to Rich and I hope you enjoyed that one as well. We've got show notes and transcripts at careynieuwhof.com/episode511. You can always find it there. And careynieuwhof.com is the headquarters for everything that I do. So if you haven't gone over and visited that, please do. Want to thank our partners, He Gets Us Partners. They are running the largest faith campaign in history. Your church can get involved and connect with people who are responding to that campaign when you go to hegetsuspartners.com/carey.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's hegetsuspartners.com/carey, and why not donate. You, your organization, if you're looking to be on the ground where it matters, check out Convoy of Hope. They're helping the war victims in Ukraine. You can go to convoyofhope.org/donate to partner with them now. Next episode, we've got Brian Zahnd. I picked up his new book, When Everything's On Fire, I had numerous people recommend it. And when I read the first chapter, I emailed him and said, "Hey, can we get you on the podcast?" If you enjoy philosophy, you're going to love the next episode. Here's an excerpt.

Brian Zahnd:

No, I don't see any solution in that at all. That's part of the problem. It can work if your kids aren't very intelligent. If they don't go to college, if you don't let them watch PBS or something. When we try to

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maintain faith by disallowing any possibility of doubt, what we do is we actually lock our doubts away in a closet where they breed into monstrosities.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So that's Brian Zahnd, next time on the podcast. Also, coming up, the comedian Trip Crosby, fascinating guy, Stephen M. R. Covey, Patrick Lencioni, Tim Tebow, Chad Veach, and a lot more coming up on the podcast. Also, got my good friend, Jeff Henderson coming back. I love Jeff. And I know so many of you do as well. Hey, before we go, I want to thank you so much for listening and for sharing this episode. I also want to share with you something that we're doing for free.

Carey Nieuwhof:

In August, I'm hosting a two-day Church Disruption Summit. It's just two hours over two days. Here's what we're going to do. We will dissect the seven disruptive church trends that will rule the next decade. Imagine it's 2032, what happened to the church? Plus, you'll leave fully equipped to lead something bigger, something better, and something more meaningful and helpful even when change is working against you. You can register for free at churchdisruptionsummit.com. You probably want to bring your whole team. Again, it's free. It's just one hour over two days, this August. That's churchdisruptionsummit.com to register for free today. Thanks so much for listening. We'll be back soon with a fresh episode and I hope our time together today has helped you thrive in life and leadership.