

Announcer:

The Art of Leadership Network.

Carey:

Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. It's Carey here. And today we are going to have a conversation that honestly, I didn't know that I would ever have. If you are a leader, particularly if you're a church leader, what do you do if there is a toxic culture in the church? Can you fix it? And I think you're going to be super encouraged by today's conversation. Jim Burgen and Jesse DeYoung from Flatirons Church are joining me. I'll tell you more about that in a minute. Today's episode is brought to you by Pro MediaFire. You can book your free consultation and let the pros help you grow your social media by going to Promediafire.com/carey and by Ministry Grid. Get \$200 off the regular Ministry Grid price by going to ministrygrid.com/carey.

Well on today's episode, I mean you know that very close to my heart, if you're regular listener, is just the train wreck of pastor after pastor who falls from grace, has an affair, abusive personality, whatever, and never gets resolved, never gets resolved. They don't take responsibility. They kind of move off into the sunset, and people are left with a mop in a bucket trying to clean up after them. And today is a very different story. I sit down with Jim Burgen and Jesse DeYoung from Flatirons Church. And Jim actually went into a very difficult season as a leader, and he's going to talk about it. He took a six month forced sabbatical, came back, apologized to the team, changed his ways.

The humility in this conversation just blows my mind, and he is committed to fixing the problems that he created. Oh my goodness. When do you hear this story? And I first heard about this on Rich Birch's podcast. I heard Jesse DeYoung, and then Sean Morgan did an incredible interview with Jim Burgen. And I brought them together for this show, and we're going to talk about the anatomy of toxic church leadership.

How does it happen? What's happening on the inside of you when you go from being a healthy leader to a toxic leader? We talk about church growth and the pressures of church growth and identity and how leadership can crush you. But most remarkably, what happens when you come back and you try to create a much healthier culture. I see this as one of the most important conversations we've had 500 episodes into the podcast. We'll see what you think, but I'd love to hear from you. You can email me at carey@careynieuwhof.com. Hit me up on the socials. I'm @CareyNieuwhof on Instagram, @CNieuwhof on other platforms. And let me tell you a little bit about Jim and Jesse. So Jim serves, still serves as the lead pastor of Flatirons Community Church, and he defines and directs the vision of Flatirons. He's got a raw and real leadership style. You'll hear that, but also incredible vision casting ability. And he will go first through the challenges when he is not serving his church, you will find him spending time with his wife, Robin, working out of the gym or hunting in the Colorado backcountry.

Jesse DeYoung has been in ministry for 19 years and currently serves as Flatirons, executive lead pastor, where he helps leaders and ministries have a significant impact through developing and equipping teams to make a high-level strategic decision. When he is not developing his staff, you can find him playing ping pong, loving coffee, and exploring the outdoors with his wife, Kara, and their four kids. And Jesse and Jim, thank you for your transparency. I'm so excited about this conversation. Well, also very grateful for our partners in this podcast.

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My church Connexus Church uses Ministry Grid. We found it super beneficial and the best news of all, they're offering our podcast listeners \$200 off the regular Ministry Grid price. So for just \$399 a year, you can get unlimited access for your church. Go to ministrygrid.com/carey to get this special offer. Well, let's have the conversation. Here is a very raw, very real, very encouraging, I think at the end of the day, conversation with Jim Burgen and Jesse DeYoung. Well, Jim and Jesse, welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you.

Jim:

Thanks so much.

Jesse:

Yeah, It's so good to be here, Carey.

Jim:

It really is.

Carey:

I appreciate both of you being together. And I think I first got wind of your story when, Jesse, I heard Rich Birch interview you on his seminary podcast. And then Jim, I heard Sean Morgan interview you on his Leaders in Living Room Podcast.

Jim:

That's right.

Carey:

And it's just a story I'd never heard told before in any church context like this, a story of burnout and coming back. But I think what really got me was the transparency and the honesty behind it. Because often when we tell our stories, we give people the sanitized version of it. We give them the cleaned up version of it. And you guys have just been so raw and so honest, Jim, about a journey that you've been on. And then Jesse, that you had to lead the church through. I thought it would be great to have the conversation. And then the fun part is right after I listen to your interview with Rich Birch, Jesse, I find myself two weeks later in Cabo, Mexico with my wife. We're on the shuttle bus being taken to the place

where we would have the retreat, and I turn around and you're there with your wife. And Jim is there with Robin. And all of a sudden I'm like, wait a minute. I'm just meeting the people. I just heard their story of, and this is really cool. So here we are a couple months later recording this.

Jim:

Jesse's behind you saying, "That's Carey Nieuwhof right there."

Jesse:

I was like, "Carey Nieuwhof listened to a podcast that I was on. What's happening?" It was an out of body experience. I'll be honest.

Carey:

So that was providential, but yeah. So let's give us a little bit of context. I don't want to tell the story. I want you guys to tell the story. So Jim, why don't we start with you a little bit about your time at Flatirons leading up to it. And then Jesse, how you play into the story, just to give people context who may not have the context, because I think it's an exceptional story the way you guys tell it.

Jim:

Yeah. Yeah, so stop me anytime going, move on, move on because it's like the story is a story. So I came to Flatirons in 2006. This is my first lead pastor gig. So obviously I'm in over my head, and I had 20 some years of student ministry background. And I always say, I'm just doing youth ministry for adults because people learn how people learn. So we do keep it pretty raw and real. And when I got here, we were meeting at a strip mall, and we had a staff of about 25. I think my first weekend here, it was maybe 25, 2600 people. The DNA of the place was we care about lost and broken people.

And I remember coming here, and there was almost a palpable buzz. Robin and I looked at each other and go, "If they don't hire us, we should move here just to go to this place because they had such a heart for lost and broken people." And I did too, as a youth pastor. And so we came on board in 2006, and God was doing something. We're in Boulder County, which kind of has a reputation of being pretty closed to the gospel, open to almost everything, a very spiritual place, just not the Holy Spirit.

Carey:

No Christianity, right?

Jim:

Oh no, no, no, no.

Carey:

It's probably very progressive, left leaning in that way politically.

Jim:

Yeah. Everybody did weed here before we legalized it. Everybody did a lot of things, but we've led the way in a lot of very... Anyway, but we cared about loss and broken people, and it was very much come as you are. And as I began to teach the word of God here, people just responded and in a crazy way. So that now the auditorium, we had increased seating, we went to six services. We started breaking down

walls so that people could sit in the lobby. And then we put in glass door so people could sit outside with speakers. I mean, horrible sight lines. I remember one Easter we had to send everybody to Taco Bell because our toilet didn't work. It was just every talk's about, you have to eliminate obstacles for people to come to church. We threw up as many as we could, and people just kept coming because it was like, hey, it makes sense. It makes sense. And it took off a rocket ship.

And so within 10 years we went from 2,500 to knocking on 15, 16, 18, 20,000 people and 30,000 people for Easter. We're like, hang on. Everybody's saying, if you build it, they will come. And they're like, they're coming, build something. Because it was just overwhelming, and it was exciting. And so we moved it. We remodeled a Walmart and a grocery store and connected them in a 4,000 seat auditorium. And then that maxed out. And now we're going to launch campuses. And then about four or five years ago, I don't know if the world changed. I changed. I don't know. It almost is like the brakes went on.

Jesse:

We stopped growing.

Jim:

We stopped growing. It plateaued about the same time.

Carey:

So this is like 2017, 2018?

Jim:

Yeah. Yeah. We're in a new building. We're launching campuses. Our numbers are up. The money's flowing. Everything that says you're winning, we were winning. And then it just hit a plateau. And about that same time, Scott Nickell, my teaching pastor, who's a good friend, he really felt called to go back to a church that he grew up in and helped lead there. And I always told him, I didn't know how much we were a team, but my mind said, I'll just throw this thing on my back, and I got this. And I've done a lot of counseling around that. I have to prove, right? That I can do this. And we stopped growing, and it just felt weird. And my life changed. And that's what I had to deal with on sabbatical is what was going on there? And the answer was, so I learned this in counseling later, Carey, is like, there's a thing called the dark side of leadership. My counselor Harv Powers wrote a book called Redemptive... I'm blanking.

Jesse:

Redemptive Leadership.

Jim:

Redemptive Leadership. I'm sorry, Harv. But there's a line in there about the dark side of leadership, but here's the tape that was playing in my head. Everybody hits their wagon to the 25% growth a year guy, and now you're not delivering, what's wrong with you? And then I looked in the mirror and went, what's wrong with me? And so I just buckled down. And just because of my personality, all my emotions, fear, sadness, shame, they all come out as anger. So I just got angry and ran over everybody close to me. And that's exhausting.

Carey:

So it went into a real season of unhealth, which we are going to unpack. I want to ask 10 supplemental questions, but I think what I want to do at this point instead is go to Jesse. Jesse, where do you come into the picture? Just so people can get an idea of the story as it developed.

Jesse:

Sure, that's great. So I knew Jim. Jim was my youth pastor growing up, back in Kentucky. And so we've had a relationship for years and years and years. Came out 10 years ago to be the first campus pastor of the first offsite campus that we launched. And so was there and walked through tons of challenges and tough stuff together. Was a campus pastor up in the mountains for about, I don't know, five, six years, and then started picking up. We launched more campuses. And the way I say it is when your first people assumed that you're best. And so they had me lead the campus pastors. I was just the first one there. And so led campus pastors, and eventually in that season of unhealth, joined the lead team right before, as Jim mentioned, and he went on his sabbatical. I joined the lead team, I think three months before that.

There were four people that reported to Jim on the lead team. So I mean it was a rocket ship for a while. And then we plateaued, and then we had all this internal criticism of what's happening? Why aren't we growing? Why are we doing the things the way that we're doing things? And then joining the lead team, I remember hearing all that chatter. And what I would say is, hey, I trust the lead team. And I trust leadership. I trust these guys, and these are questions above my pay grade. And I joined that team, and I remember going, "Oh man, now these things are at my pay grade, and I've actually got to have the conversations. And I'm part of the people responsible for it." And so it was a wake up call for me. And then now after Jim's sabbatical about, I think, a year later, I stepped into the executive lead pastor role.

Carey:

So you became executive lead pastor exactly when? We're getting into Jim's sabbatical role in a little bit in the tumult that Flatirons went through. But just to paint this out, when did you step into that role, Jesse?

Jesse:

Stepped into that role a year and a half ago, I think. So it was about a year, it was beginning of 2021.

Carey:

Yeah. So as you were coming back, is that right? Jim, have I got that right?

Jim:

Yeah. Again, not to jump ahead in the story, but coming back, we knew that things could not go back to the structure, the culture, the paradigm and the dynamics. It was just one of our first learnings when we got into sabbatical, because we had a culture leading up to that is all blame goes up. It all gets pushed up, and it all lands on my desk. I always say this. Is that when everything's going great at your church, who gets the praise and glory? God, right? When things are not going well at your church, who gets the blame? Not God. It lands on my desk. And so we had a whole culture of it's the leader, it's the leader, it's the leader. And five minutes into when I'm after sabbatical and lead team and elders, they start meeting together with staff. And then we brought an outside counselor in. He's like, "This is broken from elders to facilities. This is a mess." And when I heard about that, I kind of felt good. It's like, so I'm not the only screwed up one. There's some comfort in that.

Carey:

So let's start to unpack that a little bit. We have you on the executive team now, the executive pastor for Flatirons, Jesse. Jim, you're the lead pastor, and your church stops growing. What did that start to do to you on the inside, Jim?

Jim:

Oh, I think I can speak for all mankind. You have a voice in your head that says, see, you're not enough. And it was a matter of time until they found out. And so it just makes you question that. And again, I think I can speak for most mankind. Is that the way that you compensate for that is you just buckle down and just work harder. And so I would describe the year, especially the year, maybe the year and a half leading up to sabbatical, as every day was a panic. Every day was like tightness. Like, oh no, I've got to do this. I've got to do this. I've got to do this. And there's a really dark side. You look back and go, "Yeah, I said that. Yeah, I did that." As a senior leader of a church, nobody will say this out loud, but when you get put in a corner, here's what you're thinking, "I built this, just shut up and do what I told you to do. You wouldn't be here without me." Now that's horrible. But this is what goes through when somebody goes, a campus leader says, "I don't know, I'll check and see what if that works for our campus." And I went, "Your campus? You don't have a campus. You're under budget. You're understaffed, you're over budget. I have to raise all your money. You don't exist without me. So don't question my direction."

That's really sick, but it's the panic. It's the panic is like, "Hey, the formula worked for 10 years so obviously, I know what I'm doing." Get on my page, get on my boat, get on my bus, whatever that is. And if you don't, because I'm so scared, but scared's coming out as anger. I had a reputation as the buzz fall. And in the right moments, there was an infamous moment, it was the Tuesday before Easter, which is always an easy week in church world, right?

Carey:

Yeah, always.

Jim:

So we were going through the weekend service for Easter at all of our campuses. And I kept getting like, well, that didn't happen. Well, that's not going to happen, that's not going to happen. And Carey, I just worked my way through a room and pointed out the incompetencies in the room. My data might have been correct on some level. It was hateful. It was angry. It was...

Carey:

Can you describe what happened? And this is what is so remarkable about this story is normally what happens is you get into a toxic situation, which you did at Flatirons. You go on sabbatical, ride off into the sunset, and somebody else tells the story about how terrible it was. What's remarkable about this is you're both in leadership. You went through a journey. You're healing, and you're starting a new day. I just want to make that clear. Little bit of a, what do you call it? Spoiler alert. Spoiler alert. No, you guys, so you are describing your own leadership. Take us to that day.

Jim:

You don't have a podcast about guys that... It's still horrible, Carey. Nobody does that podcast, right? So there is a good redemptive story coming, I promise.

Carey:

There is a redemptive story, but usually it's written by someone else. It's very rare for a leader to come back and be able to lead. And you and I were talking before we started recording, I had a similar thing where I burned out. And perhaps we didn't get to the level of desperation in our church that you guys may have seen in yours. But I was heading there. I was all of that. And last 16 years for me has been a story of redemption and continued redemption and continued learning. But I'd love for you to go to that Tuesday. So you're shooting down ideas or what's happening or you go ballistic on the team? What happened?

Jim:

Well, it was like, I remember talking to a counselor one time that I stuff a lot of emotions, and then I put them in a closet. And then whoever happens to be the victim who does the last straw, gets the whole closet. And so it was years and months of pent up vomiting of emotion. And you haven't done this over and over, and you've done this, and every time I ask you to do this, and how about that thing two months ago? I mean I'm pulling stuff out of... And do you remember the time that you did this and I'm working through... And I'm basically saying, "You don't exist without me. How dare you question my leadership?" I mean, it was...

Jesse:

Jim, I remember being in the meeting. I mean, you said to one of our campus worship leaders, "It's not your campus." Because he said, "Well, we'll see if that works at my campus." And you said, "It's not your campus. They're my campuses." And we had the campus pastors lined up and the worship team and interns in there. And it was just this moment where, I mean, Carey, I went back to my office. And Jim and I talked about this. I talked to him afterwards.

But I was like, I broke down crying because Jim has been one of my heroes from youth group. He was my youth pastor, baptized me in the ocean when I was in ninth grade. And I'm seeing this leadership and seeing Jim be a leader that he's never been and a leader that I don't know, I knew he didn't want to be. And at the same time there was something was wrong. And now I can look back and say imagining the pressure that Jim felt, Scott's left, we've plateaued, Easter's got to be amazing. He's got all these ideas for it, and the worship team and different teams are resisting the ideas, and they're not feeling that pressure. Does that make sense? All that pressure is what Jim's feeling. And we weren't having any of these conversations at the moment either.

Jim:

And it's cumulative. It's not like I got put on sabbatical because of a Tuesday. It's in this mindset every time somebody said, or what about this? I heard it as a boom. You're incompetent. You don't know what you're doing, questioning everything. And so I'm like, "Just do what I'm telling you to do." Because everything, my identity felt like it was at stake. If this doesn't go well, this is about you guys are all right. I should ride off into the sunset because it's a matter of time until they pull me aside and go, thanks for your time. But you're not any good anymore. And 34 years, right? 34 years, I've served the church, and I've served it well. I got a raise every year of my life for 34 years until that year. I neglected my family for the church for 34 years and got patted on the back for it.

Now, my family and I, we've been in counseling, but everything said, the one thing you're good at. My wife is bipolar. I can't fix that. I don't know how to parent sometimes. I don't know how to do that. I was in a financial mess in debt years ago. I don't know how to do that. You know what I'm

awesome at? I can preach, and I can lead a church or a youth minister, whatever. I'm good at that. And now the one thing I think I can do well, every voice in my life is saying, you're not that great. And now all my fears of going, then what am I? And what do I have? And so I just lashed out, "Do what I'm telling you to do." And now looking back, it was all fear. But it came out as anger because anger isn't weak. Fear is weak.

Carey:

So we'll go there. You got put on sabbatical, which is quite a dynamic in and of itself. But you raised something I did want to talk about because and some of it's autobiographical, you mentioned identity. How much of your identity was tied up in the growth of Flatirons and the success of your leadership at Flatirons? Looking back on it now and knowing what now, how were your identity and success entangled, Jim?

Jim:

I think it'd be easier to say, what wasn't connected to that? I don't know. That was the one thing I could say. I know I do this well. Look at the numbers. Look at the baptisms. Look at the growth. Look at the influence. Look at the staff count. Look at the... And just the ripple and it came back to, I'm good at something, I'm really good. And then when all that kind of doesn't happen, it comes back in going, then where does that leave me? Who am I? What am I? What do I have left? If I'm not the lead pastor at Flatirons and Flatirons, isn't successful by all the measurements that we all measure church's success by, then I don't know what I have left. I mean, I knew my wife loved me. I knew my kids love me, but I'm talking about that core part of me. And I could preach a sermon that answers this for everyone else.

Carey:

And you probably did.

Jim:

I did it using Christ.

Carey:

You did, right? Yeah.

Jim:

I'm created in the image of God who, blah, blah, blah. But if you think other than other my family, this is my other love. And it doesn't feel like it wants me anymore because I'm no good at it. And so I am in a panic just trying to make it work again. I need to make it work again. And you can't operate from that. It's exhausting, and then it spirals. And so I began to withdraw from the staff. I traveled more. I went on trips with my friends. I had some staff people that I'm going to say I abused. Here's what I mean by I used them almost as hit men. "Just go take care of this, go do this." So I didn't...

Jesse:

You didn't kill anybody.

Carey:

You're totally funny.

Jesse:

Thank you.

Jim:

I thought about it. But yeah, that's probably for later, but I can't go to jail for that, can I? For saying that?

Carey:

I don't think so.

Jim:

Anyway...

Carey:

We're all in prison then.

Jim:

No, it was like, I used people. And out of their love for me and trying to honor me and respect me, they would do anything I told them to do. And they just went out and just took people out of the knees for me. And they were hit men like because Jim said so. And I'm kind of this strong arm.

Jesse:

And I would say at the time the staff, the leadership team, everybody was pulling back from Jim as well. And so it started this kind of cycle of Jim would pull back. So the staff would pull back from him. And Jim would pull back more, and the staff would pull back. So eventually, I mean, Carey, we had people who would look at me and say, "Well, Jim's not my pastor." And they worked for the church. They pulled a paycheck from our church. And at the same time, they'd say, "Jim, he's not my pastor." And so there was a lot of division amongst the staff as well. A lot of resistance that I think Jim would go back and say, "Well, this just proved my point, right"?

Jim:

Sure.

Carey:

So let's pick up the story. You got put on sabbatical. You had that terrible Tuesday again before Easter, irony of ironies, right? The time we were supposed to be celebrating the most is this bad day in church history, your history, what happened next, Jim?

Jim:

After that, we had a great Easter, we had record numbers. And it was like, yay. So it reinforced.

Carey:

There you go.

Jim:

Everything I did.

Carey:

Yeah, there it is.

Jim:

See?

Carey:

Huh?

Jim:

Right. It worked, it worked, they all towed the line. They got their crap together. They pulled together what I had asked for whatever that is on a certain level. And it was such a powerful Easter and on Easter, I'm like, "See, you all just do what I tell you to do. We get 33,000 people." And it's like, that's not good. And so I just keep on doing what I'm doing. And at that time, I don't know because I've totally disconnected with staff, and I've either intimidated them or hurt them. And so now there are pockets of staff which are actually gathering, and now it's taken on that toxicity of it's us against him. And then I had, Jesse's a young leader, who works for a stronger leader who works for me. And he's new in his role. What's he going to do?

Here's what no lead guy wants to talk about. We just go, "Oh no, that's not true." There's an imbalance of power. Not from my perspective because I'm at the top of the food chain, right? So I can say absolutely. We're brothers in Christ. Just come talk to me. My door's always open. Come on. Now I'm not going to walk into the principal's office and ask a question and look incompetent or insubordinate or have him do what I heard he did to somebody else. It's just not going to happen. So it doesn't matter what Jesse's witnessing as a junior leader in our organization at that time, he's not going to push back against me. And so now pockets of toxicity are starting to take place. And we start doing things like anonymous staff polls, right. And surveys and best workplace practices and all those kind of things.

And the information starts coming back in. And because this is how scared my lead team was of me. They had the results of the staff survey for two weeks and didn't give it to me until Memorial Day, Monday night, they emailed it. My XP emailed it to me said, "I've held onto this for a couple weeks. It's pretty bleak, and I was nervous to give it to you. But here it is." And then 30 minutes later, the chairman of our elders says, "We need to meet with you in your office tomorrow morning at eight o'clock." And at 8:30, I was on sabbatical.

Carey:

Just to timeline this, this is in 2020, 2021? When was it?

Jim:

Yeah, this is 3...

Jesse:

2019.

Jim:

2019. Memorial Day 2019. Yeah, everybody talks about 2020 and COVID just being hard. 2019, COVID is like vacation.

Carey:

So in 2019, so you've been in decline, you kind of resurrect things. You have the best Easter ever. And then they walk in and go. "Jim, the jigs up."

Jim:

Yeah, I get a... I'm up at the...

Carey:

Walk in and go, "Jim, the jigs up."

Jim:

Yeah. I'm up at the cabin with my wife, and I get this survey, and I glance at it. And then I get a text message from our chairman of the elders. And I'm like, "Okay." And I didn't see it coming. I didn't. And so I walk in the room and it's empty. I'm like, "Okay, I thought you started at 7:00 or something like that, or 8:00." And then the door opens, that door right there, opens, and in walk all my elders and walk in my lead team in a single file. They circle around the... They all have envelopes in their hand. They sit down, and they start reading that I'm on sabbatical. And they start using words like unhealthy, exhausted. "We're worried about you. Here's a list of things that we're concerned about. We're going to put you on a six month sabbatical. You'll have zero contact with the church, zero contact with social media. You and your wife are going to go to this marriage camp."

It was just went on and on. "Medically, we want you to do..." all this kind of stuff. "And in two days we have tickets booked for you and Robin to go visit one of our best friends down in Mexico city." Who's also one of my spiritual directors. "You're going to go to Mexico city for a week." And I'm like, "What?" And I didn't fight it. I couldn't breathe.

Carey:

Yeah.

Jim:

I've seen this show. It's called intervention. They all walk in with letters. Circle the table. And then you're butt's on a plane to rehab. I'm like, "What's happening?" And I will say this, it's the first time those words were ever spoken to me. "We're concerned about you. We think you're exhausted. You're unhealthy." That's the first time those words were ever spoken to me. The closest thing was Jesse came into me after that Tuesday pre-Easter meeting and went, "That was wrong. That was weird." And of course I didn't really listen. And that's what people ask me all the time is like, "Would you have listened to anybody before you went on sabbatical?" And I don't know. I don't know the head space I was in. I don't know that I would've listened to anybody's best coaching. We did sabbatical. If we write a book, the elders and I, if we write a book, our book would be how not to put somebody on sabbatical, because we did everything wrong.

It was the right thing to do. And God used it for a great, but we did everything wrong. So looking back and even in our personnel stuff today, in current day... and we talked about this on retreat earlier this week... is I don't know how I would've responded, but it would be really helpful for them to be able to look back and go, "We talked to you here and here and here and here." And when I would articulate, "How am I unhealthy," people would just say, "Well, you just are." "Well, how long has this been going on?" "Well, for a while." And all of a sudden I'm just cut off from the church and staff and it's like, "Don't come back in the building for six months." And-

Carey:

You're floored.

Jim:

I'm-

Carey:

So you did not see it coming? No clue.

Jim:

No. Which is probably why I didn't fight back. Because all my emotions came out as anger. I couldn't breathe. I'm like, I was just like, "Okay." And I went home and just sat on my couch and just broke down.

Carey:

Looking back, you got a lot of hindsight now and we're going to get to that. But if you had met you, what were you thinking that day? Were you thinking, "Good, I got it back. We just had this record Easter. I got control of this thing." What was your level of self-awareness? Did you realize you were inflicting the damage that you were inflicting? I'm just trying to get a sense. Because I think a lot of us, my burnout, I did have people come to me and say, "Hey, you're going to burn out. And I'm not sure that this is the healthiest type of leadership for our church right now." And I just ignored it and then I burned out. And it was like, "Uh crap, here we go." And you know, I've spent the last 16 years reconstructing, rebuilding leadership and my understanding of it. And here we are. But I would say my self-awareness was fairly low. I kind of knew, but not really. What about you? Did you know that you were unhealthy?

Jim:

Hindsight, yes, of course. In the moment, it didn't matter. I still had to perform. Does that make sense? It's like, I can't even entertain that I'm not healthy because Saturday night I have to walk up six steps, turn right and face cameras and nobody gets paid. Nobody gets health insurance. Nobody makes their mortgage if I don't walk up six steps on that steps, turn right and deliver the goods. And everybody knew that. So they didn't want to mess up the formula. Because when I say that we plateaued, we're still in the teens of thousands. We're still rocking and rolling. The people in the church, they might have sensed him going, "Ah, he's talking kind of angry out there today," but it came off as passion. But people on staff that were sitting there going, "I know what he means by that. I know what he means by that."

But the truth is blame got pushed on me, but also the responsibility of carrying the place got pushed on me. And so it didn't matter if I said I was unhealthy or not, I still had to show up Saturday night and deliver the goods. And so there was no margin for even to go... There was no margin in my life

for any type of self inventory. I was always just reacting to the crisis around me and sermon prep. That's all it was. And it was exhausting.

Carey:

You said something really interesting that you just snuck in there and I want to go back and revisit that you felt the anger, but it comes across as passion. I think there might be more truth to that than most of us want to admit.

Jim:

Especially when I say over and over, "Hey, I'm not angry. This is passion." If you say that seven times it might be anger.

Carey:

Yeah.

Jim:

Yeah. That's good.

Carey:

It's funny. Jim, you're making some really important observations about the justification we can make as leaders for our dysfunction, for the pressure we feel. Nobody understands the pressure I'm under. Nobody understands being responsible for 15, 20,000 people. Nobody understands payroll. Nobody understands. And then my anger, and it worked. There's that toxic cocktail in that, that keeps blowing up in the church. Do you have anything else you want to add while we're on that part of the story? Because I think there's a lot of insight there.

Jim:

Yeah. So I think if you were just analyzing everything I said, and I think maybe there's some people, some guys in my position, ladies in my position, leaders in my position and they're sitting there going, "I know exactly how that feels." But to the observer, I feel like you would judge this kind of a person as just being arrogant, narcissist. It's all about me. It's all about me. Listen, it comes from a noble place. It really does. In the moment, if I don't do this, not only does this, this place falls apart and how many people go to hell? This is the body of Christ, but God's depending upon me and I am not delivering. And so you guys got to help me deliver because I'll let God down. I'll let people down, souls down, all this kind... It comes from a noble place.

And so this, it sounds like I'm going, "I'm the rockstar here. I'm the one making hay. I'm the goal." And it's a really fine line, but it comes from a noble place. None of us got in it to be rock stars. But then you have rockstar pressure on you. And so you get lost in there sometimes. And so I just want to say to the person out there going, "I feel that pressure. I feel like everybody's dependent upon me," it comes from a noble place. I'm not letting us off the mat because it comes out really bad. But it starts... And we keep on trying to go back to it... But I'm trying to serve God here. I'm trying to serve people. Love people well. And then the more it doesn't feel like it's working the more you panic. And so it spirals. Does that make sense?

Carey:

You feel trapped don't you? It does make sense, Jim.

Jim:

Oh gosh, and lonely.

Carey:

And I think for argument, yes. So for argument's sake, there are definitely probably pastors who got in it for all the wrong reasons and it was a personal brand building thing or whatever. But I think there's way more noble purposes, good heart. They're surprised by the growth. They get trapped by the growth. They feel the pressure. All the toxins rise to the surface and they come out. And you said it was lonely. What were your friendships like?

Jim:

When I was in ninth grade, my dad got fired. He was a pastor. He got fired. And so what goes in my computer is, "Don't show your weakness, man, because they will use it against you." Everybody in my atmosphere works for me. They're an employee. Who am I going to look at and say, "I don't know if I can, if I'm doing this right. I feel like I'm failing." Because then they all work for me. And it's like, where do you go? And there's a certain level you can say to your wife and then she's going like, "Are you okay? Are you all right?" And so it's like, you just stuff it in. You stuff it in. I can't show that I'm afraid. I can't show that I think I'm failing. I don't know what to do. So I'm just going to panic and plow on. And it just escalates. Trapped is the word I think you used. I'm trapped. I can't get off this thing. And God took me off the treadmill on a Tuesday morning kicking and screaming. Because I didn't fight back in the moment, but I found my legs.

Carey:

Yeah. And we'll talk about that. I want to talk about what it was like to get that intervention. But I want to ask this question and then I want to talk to Jesse for a second. Had the elders not intervened that morning, where would this have gone? Where would the dominoes have fallen? Would you have had an affair? Would you have blown the church up? Would you have imploded? what would've happened?

Jim:

Oh wow. I think staff would've quickly just started exiting and then I would've spiraled more. And then I think all the things that you just mentioned are possible for any man. 'Cause I could say, "No, I've never done that before." Nobody ever had the affair, got the DUI, did the whatever. Nobody planned on doing that. But in that panic, you're just not sane. You're just not thinking right. I think you used the phrase earlier, what was I thinking? You're not thinking right. And so the entire compass is off. You don't know where north is. And so I don't know. I think that the way I am wired, Carey, I would've said, "If I can't win there, then screw it all. I'll win over there." And whatever that would take to go, "See? You are enough." And there's a list. There's a list of pastors we can all name. Start checking off one after another going, "Yeah, they were failing there. Therefore, they went over there." And for 10 minutes they felt like a winner and it ruined their whole life.

So God pulled me out of this before that. So, the cool thing about... And then I'll let, I'll shut it for a while... The cool thing about this is from that initial meeting with the elders, and the dozens of meetings that happened over the next six months together, in counseling together, in therapy together, and in one-on-ones all that kind of stuff, there was one mantra that came over and over and over. And

it's the only way I think I made it. And that was the phrase, "So that you can come back and lead." So it was always understood.

Carey:

That's what the elder said to you that day. Right?

Jim:

From day one. I didn't hear it, day one. I didn't hear it. But they articulated from day one, "So that you can come back. So that you can come back," over and over and over and over. I remember one time I, one of our elders was over at the house and I was throwing a fit about some decision that they had made. And he said, "Why does that bother you so much?" I said, "Because I lead FlatIrons." And he says, "You don't right now." And I'm like, "Go ahead and kick me in the stomach, man." But it was an aha moment. Like, "Hey, you're in time out for a reason."

And you've got to lean into this instead of stop fighting it. And we'll get more into that. But that is, I think, for most leaders out there, pastors, they hear the words, "They put me on sabbatical." You mean they started me towards the exit door. 'Cause the agenda behind most sabbaticals is a soft firing. And this was never that. This was always, "So that you can come back." And whether I heard it or not, you play the tapes, you read the notes, "So that you, so that you can come back." And eventually I started believing it.

Carey:

So you feel trapped, Jim. You're doing whatever you feel is in your power to try to get it back to where it was. You're reasonably unaware of how bad the situation has gotten. And you had no idea your elders were about to order you onto sabbatical. Jesse, how did it feel for you and for the rest of the team? Because I think one of the significant issues we have in leadership is our self-perception is often at odds with how others experience us or see us. So what was it like for you guys, who weren't Jim, to be under Jim's leadership, leading up to that moment?

Jesse:

Sure. I remember a couple weeks ago, Jim and I were talking and Jim was just like, "Jesse, I was honestly completely shocked when you walked in." And my internal response was, "How did that surprise you? The way that you were leading in the moment was..."

Jim:

Can we have a time out?

Jesse:

For me, just watching it and watching this pattern, I remember some creative director talking about, they call it a crap cake. And it's this idea of you serve the cake on Easter. Most Easters are a crap cake. It looks beautiful. It's amazing. But it's filled with crap to make it happen. That was what FlatIrons felt like for a season. And it was devastating to watch.

And at the same time we needed more of Jim's presence. We needed more of Jim's leadership and really his pastoring, and Jim's pulling away. And when Jim is engaging with us, it's not, it didn't feel like he's a pastor. I'm trying to, Gary, and Jim and I, we've talked about this before. I feel comfortable saying it. But it felt like there was a tyrant who would come in say, "This is what I want you to do. Just do

it." And there was so much dysfunction among our staff, the conversations that we would have. And what we realized when Jim left and when Jim was placed on sabbatical was the loneliest season of my life. I had my first and only panic attack where we were trying to do flooring in my house. And I just started. I couldn't figure out how to measure something. I started crying. I told my wife, "Kara, I don't know what's wrong with me." And I just had to go sit in the garage for an hour. It was so lonely.

We had pointed all the fingers at Jim. "Jim's the problem. Jim's responsible. If Jim's out, we're going to be fine. This is going to be okay." And we wanted to show Jim when Jim got back from his sabbatical, six months later, "Man, look what we've done with healthy leadership at the church." And it was one week in, and I just remember going, "Jim wasn't the only problem." There was a problem among all the staff, the way that we treat each other. And there was this pressure that was on Jim, that was now on me and the rest of the leadership team. And I felt a fraction of the weight that Jim was feeling in that moment. I was like, "Oh, this is what it feels like for Jim to carry what he's been carrying in the weight of the organization." And it was lonely.

And when I found myself leaning into controlling people, that's when I knew something's unhealthy. There's that book, Love and Respect. Jim and I were talking about this, Love and Respect. They say, typically, women need love. Men need respect. If I can't get your respect, I'm going to try to control you because at least I get what I want done and respect for me. Ultimately, respect can be earned and deserved. What I really wanted underneath that respect was actually love. I wanted people to just love me for... Does that make sense? Not for what I did, but just for who I am. But when you're in a certain position of leadership, everyone relates to you. Not in a, "I love you unconditionally," but there is a little bit of, "I love you because of what I expect out of you or because you act a certain way or because I rely on you."

And so that period, was a period of loneliness and stress, and honestly, Gary, to be honest, there was also a little bit of refreshment to go, "Man, we're getting to step into leadership again and make some decisions that we weren't able to make at the time beforehand because Jim was making all those decisions."

Carey:

Jim, it's the day of. Your kind of like comatose. You're like, "Did this just happen?" What were the emotions that happened in the hours and days and weeks following your forced sabbatical? What's going on inside you?

Jim:

We talked about this a while back. I felt like part of me died that day. It felt like death. I'm laying on a bed. It felt like a funeral. It felt like the death of every dream, every hope, shame, embarrassment. Throughout sabbatical people asked, "Did you ever think about quitting?" And there's fleeting thing, fleeting moments of, "Well," but I never, never felt like quitting. My biggest question is how do I ever go back and face everybody? And it's like what Jesse just said. Through counseling, I... One of my shadows, whatever it is, for a season of my life, I'm convinced or have been convinced the only reason people love me is because I produce. And the moment I don't produce, God will find somebody who can and he'll just move me out and they'll just move me out. And then they'll bring in the next widget to do what I do.

And that felt like, "Yeah, God's just moving on. Church is just moving on without me. Thanks for your time. Bye." And I felt like death. My wife didn't try to fix me. She just listened to me and held me. She didn't say, "Well, have you thought about this?" She didn't give any suggestions. I couldn't have heard them anyway. She just was with me. And James and Aaron, down in Mexico City where we ended

up with, he looked at me and he said, "Jim, I don't care what you've done. I love you. And I'm here for you." And he didn't know any of the details really at that point. I just needed unconditional love.

And some space. It's weird. I showed up in Mexico City and they were starting a new cohort. And the guy that was leading the cohort is a missionary from Spain. I didn't even want to go to church, but they told me, "Come over. Come over. It's Mexico." So everything's on different time. "Come over at noon. Church will be over. It meets at their house. And we'll have dinner. And then we'll go on with the day." And so we got there at 10 after 12 and church was just starting and I'm like, "Great. All right." So of course I'm not going to go into the house and ignore all those people. 'Cause I've been there before on mission trips and stuff, and they all knew who I was. But I was sitting on the back row and Robin makes up one half of a song in Spanish and we don't even speak Spanish. She has to go in the house because she's in tears and I'm in the back. I'm crying. I don't know what we're talking... "Si, senior." I'm just crying.

And the missionary gets up and he teaches on Matthew 11. Jesus is saying, "You've hidden some things. Father, you've hidden somethings to some people and you've revealed to other people, but now I'm going to reveal them to you, to these people." That's a paraphrase. And then the next, so whatever he says next is, "I'm going to describe God for you." And he goes into it, come unto me, all you who are weary. And I'm like, "Are you kidding me? This is what you're going to teach on? Come unto me, all ye who are weary and exhausted and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

And then it goes on. It says, "For I am gentle." He's describing God. "I am gentle and humble in heart." And I cry, "Bullshit. You're not gentle. Of all the words, you're holy. You're righteous. You're definitely just. You're really mean right now. But humble and gentle is like," and it just overwhelmed me. But when I got home from Mexico, I got online and I found a yoke, an Amish yoke that was 200 years old. And I ordered it. And I took it out to my cabin and I nailed it to the porch wall and put a plaque under it with that verse. And for the next three months, God was so gentle.

I don't think about God being gentle and humble of heart. I think about him being holy and all that. But he just... I yelled at him and I stomped my foot and I told him to give me my church back. And he told me, "It's not your church," and we'll get to that later. But yeah, it was death. It was panic. I don't want to say relief because I didn't feel relief at all. It's just like, "I don't know what to do. I have no idea what to do." They didn't articulate to me. If they said, "On Thursday, you did this. Stop doing that," I could correct that. But basically it was, "You're just wreck." what did I do? "You just are."

I asked Jesse, this is a conversation where I said, "What did I do?" I asked him this a couple months ago. What did I do? It wasn't that meeting that says, "There, let's put his butt on sabbatical." And Jesse looked at me and went, "It just all happened on your watch." And my aha moment was it's not all my fault. It was my responsibility and I didn't lead well I pushed it out. Pushed it down. If everybody's pushing it up, I was pushing it down. Or if I was pushing it up, I'd say, "God, you need to do your job better here. Because I'm showing up every day." It was just like a time of not breathing.

And probably my best metaphor for what God did during that sabbatical is the year before I'd gone to Scotland. And I love Scotland. I did that DNA test and I'm 17% Scottish. I'm like Braveheart. And, but I remember driving around in our tour, the guide pointed at one of those dry stack walls. They stack the stones from the field up and they make all these walls. And he said, "That wall's been there for, we estimate 4,000 years." And I'm like, "What?" He says, "Oh yeah, pre-Roman times, pre..." I'm like, "What? There's nothing being built in America that's going to be here for a hundred years from now. Let alone 4,000 years."

And so when I went on sabbatical, I'm like, "Well, they said just go away, just rest." And I've got a cabin up in the mountains. And so I said, "I'm going to build a dry stack wall. I've got rocks and some mountains. I got rocks everywhere." And so I got online. I learned how to do it. I had a stone mason give

me some tutoring. And for the next four months, I built this a dry stack wall and I lost count at 6,000 stones.

The first third of that wall is anger and bitterness. And every rock that I'm stacking up, I am rehearsing speeches of when I get back. I'm going to march in her office. I'm going to fling that door open and, "Pack your stuff, girl, and there's the door." And I'm going to clean house and I'm going to do this. I've got 80 acres. I can hide the bodies. I was just-

Carey:

You were livid.

Jim:

They'll know I'm right. And then that middle two months, that's when I really started leaning into my work and started having some, listening to God and listening to some spiritual direction, really digging into my counseling. And then those last two months, the last third of that wall was about grace, asking for and extending grace.

And the best picture I have... Because there was no plan. After the fact, we found a great sabbatical and counselor. After the fact, we found out that the whole organization is broken. After the fact, we realized that we don't even have a governance structure. We don't know what the relationship is between here and here and here. All that was after. There was no plan.

But God was in it, obviously, and my six month sabbatical looks like this. The first third, descent. I'm stomping my foot and telling God he's not a good God. And those people are not good people. And in descent, I was addicted to FlatIrons and he pried it out of my fingers. He took away from me. And again, I stomped my foot and told him, "Give me back my church." I did my work in the middle third, and then started rebuilding that last two months. I had healing to do with my family, that I had injured. I'd injured my kids in our relationship. I did that. I wasn't paying attention to it. I injured relationships with friends. As a matter of fact, I looked around and went, "I don't have any really. I don't miss anybody. I just do church. I don't miss anyone." Now, I can say that there are a few, I would. I remember listening to who... Young Guns...

Jesse:

Brad Lomenick?

Jim:

Yeah. Brad Lomenick talked about his eight. And that was like, "Who are the eight?" Your pall bearers. And I came up with three and the rest floored me. That's not good.

Aha moments though. The biggest learnings from that... I'm jumping ahead. So do you want to stop? Here's significant moments. I'm sitting on my couch. Every week or once a week, I would sign in with James Henderson down in Mexico City. Tight friend, spiritual director in my life. And I said this. I said, "Hey, James, I don't know how much longer I can do this. I feel like I'm in a long dark tunnel. And every time I look down the tunnel, I just see more tunnel. And every time I see a light, I go, 'Okay, maybe that's the light at the end of the tunnel.' It's just one more freight train, going to run me over. I don't know how long I can do this."

And he said, "Why?" Of course the spiritual director doesn't give advice. He just asks questions. He says, "Why do you think God still has you in that tunnel? What does, what is it he might want you to learn?" And it's like, I'm trying to fight my way out of the tunnel, which is a control issue. And my aha

moment... Every once in a while things crystallize. I can give you three points right now. This was one of those weird things. It was like, I know what God's trying to teach me. It's not my church. It's His. And I was operating like this is Jim's church and everybody works for Jim.

So this is not my identity. I'm not in control. Control is an illusion. I don't control 99% of my life. I don't think I control one. I try to stay in shape. But if my schedule is crazy and start dividing, it's just going to do it. I don't care how much fiber you eat. I might make it home tonight if I drive carefully, but I'm not in charge of what's coming at me. I've tried to have a good relationship with my kids, but they have their own journey. And so I have... Control is an illusion. And the more I try to control things, I find out... I tell myself I'm trying to help people. Or I'm trying to get us to a place. It's me. I'm trying. I like being a savior.

I would never have admitted that. Bailing out your kids or fixing everybody's problems, you want to say it's for their good, because I love them. Man, no, you get to be the savior. And that feels good. There is one savior. And that role has been filled and you know, and I ain't him. So control is an illusion. And the big one for me was at the end of the day, all that counts really is me and Jesus and me and Robin. That's what it's supposed to be. And I would always... I've never had an affair with a person. I've had an affair with the church. She's a really sweet mistress and she makes me feel good. And she tells me I'm awesome. And when all the other parts of my life are failing, she's sweet.

Carey:

One of the reasons I'm so grateful to have this conversation is because there are literally hundreds of thousands of people who are deconstructing their faith right now. And I think in some measure, it's because of the kind of dynamics that we're talking about in this interview. And I'm so grateful for your just absolute transparency on this. But I want to talk to both of you about deconstructing the church leadership culture that produces the kind of toxins that you felt in 2019, that I felt at different points in my relationship.

With a little bit of distance in it now, how do you think you got there? How does a growing church get that unhealthy? And we hinted at it a little bit. And then I definitely later want to talk about having a healthier culture. But I'd just like to execute that a little bit. What are the ingredients that allows us to, I think, genuinely lead people to a relationship with Christ, but doing it in a way that is very un-Christlike and treating people around us in a very un-Christlike way? And I say this as somebody who has felt those tugs, myself.

Jesse:

Looking back on it, one thing is, I don't think we ever tapped the brakes when it came to growth at Flatirons. It wasn't, we were never like, oh, let's try to go, let's grow until the very end there. It really was growth was just happening. We got to respond to it. So yeah. Let's add a service. Yeah. Let's do Saturday nights. Yeah. Let's add campuses. Yeah. Let's add staff. And I mean, our campuses, that's what everybody was doing at the time. And so we had ...

Jim:

You never heard the seminar on you're going too fast. Slow down. You never heard that. It was never a seminar. Right? And that's what we did.

Jesse:

And we just kept on going. And in our bent, we're kind of like anti-corporate. We're a rebellious church that way. And so anytime we would introduce a system or a structure or anything that would actually help frame up the growth, our staff and ourselves would go, I think we're betraying our roots. I think we're not being FlatIrons. This is not FlatIrons because this feels like a system. This feels like a structure.

And so you have a 170 person staff. You've got five campuses. We've got 18,000 people with the structures and systems of maybe a church of three or 4,000 at the time. And so inevitably what's going to happen is all issues, all blame, all responsibility is just going to be pushed up and pushed up and pushed up and really was going to rest on Jim's shoulders to say, "Okay, this is on you let's hope that you produce." And if he didn't or if he produced in a way that we didn't like, or didn't make us feel good, then we would say, "Oh, there's got to be something wrong with Jim." And again, when Jim went on sabbatical, we realized, man, there was issues with all of us at the time. Yeah. What else would you say?

Jim:

I would echo the same thing, is again, nobody's going to ever say, "You just need to take a breath and slow down." So when I go work out at the gym, this is what everybody knows. If you're a runner or a weightlifter or whatever, is you got to pace yourself or you're going to get injured. Right? Small gains, long term, not one big gain. You're not going to work out on Tuesday and all of a sudden look in the mirror and going, wow, I can see a difference. Right?

Jesse:

Well, look what happened to me.

Carey:

Yeah. Yeah.

Jim:

It's 500 Tuesdays. And then you go the cumulative effect. Otherwise you're going to strain. They were putting weight on the plate and we were straining, but we got the weight up every time. Every time. And we got exhausted. Right? So I was on staff at a really large church back in my youth ministry days. And we went from that, hey, the whole staff's in the room with the lead pastor around the table, telling jokes, going on staff retreat, playing sports together, all that kind of stuff. And when I left that church, it wasn't 35 people on staff. It was 400 people on staff. And there was an inner circle and there was a next circle and there was a next circle and it got really, really corporate. And the lead pastor was in a tower somewhere. Right? So when I became the lead pastor here, I'm like, I don't want that. It changed us.

And so the reality is, again, it sounds noble to go like, hey, we're as intimate and fun at 175 staff as we were at 30. First of all, Jim that's because you're not one of the 175. You're one of the five. So it still feels cool and intimate to you. Everybody else is frustrated because they don't know what's going on.

When we were 30 people, and I had an idea on Thursday or Friday for the weekend service on Saturday, Sunday, we could pivot like that. Because everybody was real close, right? Now, it's like, if I pivot 10 days out, remember that game used to play on the playground where everybody holds hands in the guy on the end, swings all the way out? I turn left, and it's easy for me. The guy on the left going 75 miles an hour. He's like ah? Right? And to me it's like, isn't that a rush? No, it's not a rush. Right? Because they're going home and telling their families, oh, I'm not going to be home this weekend either. You know? I didn't know the dominoes. So communication was bad.

Jesse:

And I think that we didn't guard our culture at all.

Jim:

No.

Jesse:

In the early days, the culture just naturally grew up and grew in alignment. But when we stopped growing, when we were so big, our culture overgrew. And we've always been, we'd say, a fun staff and raw and real. And it overgrew into we're raw and real, which means, say anything that you want about anybody that you want and you're not going to get in trouble for it. And you're not going to get corrected. Or have fun at other people's expense. And so, our culture overgrew and that was something that we had to correct. And we've been doing a lot of work on it, is pruning our culture back to be really what it was in the beginning and then what it grew out of.

Jim:

Yeah. We called our culture raw and real. Carey, it was sin. And then we'd called sin is foxhole humor. Right? It's just what we do to cope with the stress things like that. It was sin. And I hate to say this as a dad of a daughter. I wouldn't want my daughter on this staff. A young mom on this staff. I don't know she would've felt safe because of the humor. Right?

Jesse:

Wow.

Jim:

And I was right in there with them. I was part of some of the discussions going like, are we even saved? You know? And it's like, oh. No. No. It's just our culture. We're just being raw and real and stuff like that. It's like, no. It was sin. And it was gossip. And it was divisiveness and it was destructive. And by that, I don't think anybody was intentionally divisive. I think it was just like, there was no unity. Does that make sense? It was like every man for himself. That might be a better word. It was destructive, but we never would've called it that. We would've gone like, eh, it's FlatIrons. We were for church for lost and broken people and we don't want to ...

Jesse:

We were so non-confrontational at the moment that you would not call people out on talking about somebody that way. You would not call somebody out on, they've got different ideas for ministry or the direction we should be headed or for leadership. And so what ended up happening was we had 100 different opinions about this is what FlatIrons should value. This is how FlatIrons should do ministry. And so we were all working in opposite directions, and that's one of the things that I think was frustrating to the Jim, but also just held us back from making progress is that we were all going in our own directions.

Jim:

Yeah.

Carey:

So the cynics and the de-converted and the critics would perhaps argue that growth and scale and size almost always has an element of toxicity to it, or a lot of toxicity to it. I'd love your take on that. Do you think it's inevitable that when you grow, you become unhealthy, that church growth is basically just a cancer? Or do you think it's possible that health and growth can coexist?

Jim:

I think if health and growth don't coexist, toxicity is inevitable. I think that remember when you were in junior high and you had a growth spurt and it just hurt?

Carey:

Yeah.

Jim:

You just hurt. Okay? And so I think there's a reason why God says, "You can only grow so fast," and there's gimmicks and there's tools and there's sticks and there's ploys or whatever you want. And you can escalate this thing. You can escalate growth really, really fast. Right? But if your infrastructure and your communication structure and your level of trust within the organization, the people in the pews, or the people in the auditoriums, they're not going to sense it until all of a sudden the bottom is falls out and they're going to like ... what happened? Right? Most of my church didn't understand why I was on sabbatical.

Jesse:

Sure.

Jim:

And there were all kinds of polls out there. There were podcasts. The Over Under. What really is the story? And is Jim coming back? And I think I was in Vegas. I was in a betting line in Vegas. It was like the rise and fall of Jim Burgen. It's like, listen, sorry. You put that soundtrack into anybody's story, and they're just a demon. But you'll probably have to edit that out. But I'm sorry. But let me jump ahead.

So we're now a church of 10,000 post-COVID, right? That's directionally, that's where we are going. Right? And that's huge. That's bigger than the town I grew up in. Okay? So it's not like we're going, we're just that. I mean, this is an enormous church, right?

Carey:

Yeah, it is.

Jim:

And we have a staff, what's our staff number now.

Jesse:

A little over 100.

Jim:

A little over 100. Less than half of those were pre-sabbatical. You know? We now have a staff culture that I'm going to say, is it totally healed? There's still bits and pieces. The way that we do governance now around here is we have definitely ends that we're going for. We would like to see people be baptized. We'd like to see people take spiritual formation grows. We'd like to see these people engaged. So we have those normal ones. But now on one of ours, every year we're going to be measured on staff health, because staff health, this is going to sound really bad and everybody has to get counseling around it, but staff health is as important as baptism numbers.

Jesse:

Sure.

Jim:

Okay? Right? It's more important than attendance numbers because if Satan was really smart, he'd grow your church really, really big and then take you out at the knees. And then the domino ripple effect takes out thousands more. Right? Does that makes that sense?

Jesse:

I think, big church, small church, they can be healthy. They can be unhealthy. I just think that when a big church is unhealthy, man, it causes so much damage. And we still reflect on relationships with people that I had. A friend of mine he's on our staff right now, I grew up in a pastor's home, and he just said, "Hey, how did you grow up and want to go into ministry?" And I was like, I had a great dad, great pastor, and I didn't experience church hurt. My dad didn't pass along his church hurt that he experienced by being a part of a staff onto me. Sometimes people, they cannot help passing along church hurt to their kids. You know? You get fired from a job immediately, unjustly. You're kept poor for so long. Different things like that.

But I just feel like, Carey, there are probably dozens of people that look back on FlatIrons and look back on their time at FlatIrons. And it has caused church hurt and damage from being on staff here that we can't get back. And I've tried to make some amends with that. And I've tried to do my best to repent of the ways that I contributed to it. And at the same time, what we can do moving forward is say, "We can't go back to that. We have got to be different moving forward," but that's part of our story, is that they're going to be people that point to me and point to Jim as part of their church hurt and deconstruction story. I don't know, man. That's a struggle for me.

Carey:

Well, that's honest and that's real and that's vulnerable. And I think you raise a really good point. There are dysfunctional small churches. You know? Toxic small churches. And there are unhealthy mid-size churches. And this is the remarkable part of the story. And this is the hope. And this is one of the reasons. I mean, you did come back from sabbatical and you are still leading FlatIrons.

Before we get there, Jim, I got to ask you. The kind of pivot that you made in your whole approach to ministry, identity, life, humility, repentance, change, transformation. I mean, this isn't your first rodeo. You've been in leadership a long time, but sometimes that can take 15 or 20 years for people to get that far, or to even have, honestly, what I would see is the humility to be able to have this conversation and go, yeah. That was me. Not that was me in the 80s. It's like, that was me 72 months ago. It was pretty remarkable. How did that growth accelerate? And then what was it like coming back? Because as you said, the script changed from when you were building that rock wall from, oh, I know

exactly what I'm going to say to him, what I'm going to say to her, to a very different ethos when you came back.

Jim:

Yeah. Well, gosh, I don't want to come across as this pious sage who's like, I've been to the desert and this is what the Lord told me. I'm not that deep. I'm just not. So I don't want to give myself too much, but the truth is FlatIrons wasn't my problem. I was my problem. Okay? I used FlatIrons to medicate my problem. Right? Am I enough? Am I okay? Am I sufficient? Where's my value? Am I successful? Those are questions that can't be answered by that.

So until I went, not my church, not my identity, and I got to get my priorities back in order, and that is, I got to run after Jesus and my wife, and FlatIrons is on the list, because it's not not important, but it's not the defining thing of my life. Now, once I turned that corner, again, I don't want to paint myself. I came back and I was like, by golly, let's just all be collaborative. And let's all just hold hands and what do you want to do? All right? Because at the end of the day, I still have to walk up six steps, turn right, and face tens of thousands of people with millions of dollars of equipment and pay the bills and all that. Right? But the difference was, now I have a truth to go back to that says, "That's not who you are. That's not where you get your value. You don't have to control that. You have to release that. You have to play a longer game here."

So in the early days of a church, and basically when I got here, we restarted this. The DNA was the same, but we had to restart it. Okay? The guy at the end of the table in my position is the creative force for the most part. Hey, I want to see this. This is my vision. This is my paradigm ministry. Hey, this is what I want our ethos, our culture, to be. He's the driving force. But a certain point comes that if everybody's just looking at the end of the table for that, then everybody else's creative vision atrophies. And now they just look at you going, just tell us what to do. Right? And so if you raise your children that way, my children can't make a decision without me. They still live at home in their 30s and 40s. And I still have give them allowance. Then, that's not because they love you. Because they never learned how to be an adult. Right?

And so in parenting, you go, I'm going to let my kid do this. This is not exactly how I would do it. And I'm not going to let him fail totally. Because there's too much at risk. There's too much at stake. Right? But if I'm going to let them fail, I'm going to let them fail forward. Right? Because they'll get more muscle and they'll get more development. Right? And eventually now they're a contributing force.

I think I speak for every lead guy out there. We have confidence that we can walk up those five steps, turn right, and deliver the goods. We have confidence that God has gifted us or else we wouldn't be leading this, okay? But what we have to submit ourselves to is that just because we have good ideas doesn't mean it's the best idea. And if we would throw our idea out there and then cultivate a culture where someone goes, hey, can I add to that, or can I tweak that a little bit, and not feel like what? What's wrong with my idea? It leads to a better idea. It does.

Now a lot of times, we come back to my idea because I've been doing this longer than most of the people in the room have been alive. But I would say many, many, many times, I can sit there going, and then I have to call this out as a senior leader, I like your idea better than mine. And then they go, huh? What? Because I don't have to control it.

I was at a retreat yesterday with my lead team and my campus pastors, right? And we had the post-it notes up on the wall. Here are the issues. Here are the ideas. Here's the vision, here's this. Right? And I'm sitting there going ... and at the end when we were debriefing the day, I went, there is a day. Because I had a list in my head of this is new information to me. I didn't know that happened. Because

I've been on a six month break. I come back now I'm going, I didn't know we hired them. I didn't know we fired them. I didn't know we were going to have that. That's an event. Oh, I'm speaking at it. Well, good to know. I'm keeping all this in. Right? There was a day when I would've looked at that list and I would've started shooting it down because it wasn't my idea.

Jesse:

Oh wow.

Jim:

It really was because I had to be perceived in my mind as the senior leader, right? And now I'm going, that's awesome. That's good. Or help me understand. I think we ought to do that. Help me understand. And so because of that, my identity's not at stake anymore. And I'm trying to develop leaders, right? This guy right here, every time I talk about Jesse, I just expect he's going to get recruited by every church in America. So he's off limits. Okay?

So I couldn't have come back without him, without us having the really, really hard conversations of about ... I looked at him a few months ago and I said ... I'm going to clean this up for your podcast. "If you screw me over, I don't have another one in me. I'm choosing to trust you." And I do trust him and he's proven trustworthy. And he's had to make that decision back in my direction too. Am I going to trust the leader that God put in time out for six months because he was toxic and unhealthy? And so we have this cadence now of communication and trust and honor. But because of that, I have more healthy margin in my life. I have enough margin in my life that I had to have counseling around the guilt I had over margin. Does that make sense?

Carey:

Tell us more about that.

Jim:

Yeah. Here's the senior leaders. I need to be the first in the office and last to leave. Yeah, you really don't. You just communicated you neglect your family. That's what you've communicated. Right? I need to be at everything every time or else it's not important. If you're not at staff meeting, then Jim doesn't care or this isn't really that important. I don't need to be there either. Right? If Jim doesn't speak at it, it's not right. It's like, no, no, no. When I got back from sabbatical, I had to discipline myself, because I wanted to empower Jesse and my lead team. We are leading. But if I'm in the room, everybody defers to me. So for this guy to be perceived as the senior leader, the number two guy, I can't be in the room.

And I'm sitting there going what's everybody think about me? Does everybody think I don't care? Do they think I'm checked out on the staff? No, I need to them to say, "Jesse, why isn't Jim here?" It's like, I'm here. Jesse needs to say, "I'm here. Jim's here. We're here." Right? And I had to deal with that. It's like, what will people think about me? Will they think that I'm whatever that is? Or so I work offsite on Monday because Monday is my big writing day. So I go to off and I'm working, but I'm not working here because here everybody goes, can I have five minutes? And there's your day. Right?

Carey:

Everybody.

Jim:

So I work offsite on Monday. I come to one staff meeting a month usually and give a word or a word of encouragement. But all the staff meetings and we do a weekly staff meeting, because we still need that. We need to be in a room together. We're one staff. We're not five campuses. We're one church. Right?

And Jesse or one of the lead teams leads it. And then I show up and go, hey. So Tuesday is that day and I'm flexible on Tuesday. Wednesday, the staff owns me. I'm in that meeting, that meeting. I'm present. I'm this. I'm that. I'm that. Thursday is programming for two weekends, three weekends out from now. On Thursday afternoon, we do a run through of our service. I have to get in my truck and I don't come back on campus until Sunday. So Thursday afternoon through Sunday morning, that's my weekend. Right? And I meet with the lead team in there and I meet with Jesse in there. But Jesse is me. Our staff now sees when Jesse's here, Jim's here. When the lead team's here, Jesse's here, which means Jim's here. Right? And that has afforded me such margin. I just came off a six week break, six weeks.

It's part of my sabbatical comeback. My leaders sat down and went, we want you to take a six week block in the summer and then another week in the fall, another week in the spring. And then my preaching cadence right now is four on two off. And I learned that from Michelle, because when you do like three on one off, you don't unplug. Right? But two, you do. Right? And so my goal is four off.

Now, seasonally, that's a little bit different. We have some mission trips schedule. I might go to tour mission things or maybe leading between Easter and my sabbatical, I might go a little bit heavy because I'm going to be gone so much, but that's another thing. I'm possibly looking at succession, maybe five years from now. We're already planting seeds about that, which means I have to wean this church off me. Does that make sense?

Jesse:

It does.

Jim:

I am the primary voice. Most of the people at Flat Irons came to Christ because they trusted me and then trusted Jesus. And that can show you biblically. Paul would go like, yeah. Follow me as I follow Christ. And eventually, I'll get out of the picture and you just keep on going. Right? Because I have a lot of people come in here. I don't trust the church. I don't, but that really handsome bald guy on stage, I trust him, right? And he makes sense. But that means that whoever follows me is a sacrificial lamb. And so I'm working with Sean Morgan and some different people like that to say, "How do I prepare the soil?" Before sabbatical, if you would've talked about succession, I would look at you went ... what?

I remember saying one time, "If you say, 'But what if you get hit by a bus,' one more time, I'm going to throw myself in front of a bus." Right? Because it's like, do you want me to die? Do you want me to leave? But now looking back, I don't know if it was they were thinking of it. You might burn out on us any moment here. Nobody said that to me, but do we have a plan? That's what I think was in the back of people's minds.

Carey:

We're so dependent on you.

Jim:

Oh yeah.

Carey:

It would all fall apart with without you.

Jim:

Totally. Totally dependent upon me. And that felt good. Oh, it's too heavy for one person. It's too much. Crush me. Right? Now, my elder sat me down and went, what can we do to help you get ready for after that? What? Nobody did that for my dad. You know? He died of cancer, poor. Nobody was looking out for him. Nobody's thinking about, hey Chuck, when you're not here anymore, how can we make sure that you and your mom, you and your wife are ... nobody thought about that. These guys are going, hey, how can we come alongside you? How can we do this? How can we do this? How can we prepare you for that? We want you to be healthy until the day you walk out of here. And how about this? After you leave here, will you help the new guy? What?

Right? I think Sean said it best, is that the most important thing about my succession plan, whenever it happens, is not who succeeds me. It is did I prepare the soil, the FlatIrons soil, for who God's going to plant here next? Because otherwise, that doesn't feel threatening to me at all. The healthiest thing I can do is we had four different teachers come in over the six weeks I was gone. And they were quality, quality teachers, but people went, oh, there's voices other than Jim. That's not threatening to me. I'm trying to play a longer game now.

Carey:

Whereas, five years ago that would've been threatening?

Jim:

Nobody's speaking on my stage and I want to read their sermon before they get up there. As a matter of fact, if you're going to have somebody come in and speak, make sure they're worse than me. Right? Nobody's going to saying that out loud.

Carey:

Wow. Okay. Well you named some things that no one's going to saying that out loud. But it's 100% true.

Jim:

Absolutely.

Carey:

It's like people feel threatened by greatness. Right? Jessie, I got to ask you. When Jim came back from sabbatical, what was the response like? Were people thinking this can't be true or I'm just afraid he's going to be the same or who is this guy? And I'm sure there were apologies that needed to happen. Tell us about that process.

Jesse:

Yeah. When Jim got back, I mean, it was our highest attended service in years when Jim came back. Because to the church, they were like, our pastor's back. We're so excited. For the staff, there was a lot of uncertainty. We still hadn't fully yet leaned into we are all guilty in making this the toxic workplace that it was. That still was something that was going to come probably another year later. And so, there was fear.

There was hope of like, man, I hope he's different. I hope that God takes this. And I remember we were recruiting a worship leader and he asked us while Jim was on sabbatical, and he goes, so is Flat Irons in a dip or is Flat Irons on the decline? And I just remember looking at him and going like-

Carey:

Wow.

Jesse:

Kevin, I don't know. I don't know which one we are. And so much of it was dependent on how Jim came back and how the staff responded. And so there was still, I would say, probably half the staff had some animosity toward Jim at times. And so Jim came back and he met with every single staff in groups, in I think, how many? 22 meetings?

Jim:

Yeah, I thought it was going to be the tour of shame to the 20 meetings over two weeks with every staff person from facilities to worship team, to everybody. And then a couple specialty areas of people. I met with some women on staff who felt really, really offended, not just so much by what they had read from me, but just the whole culture. And so I met with them individually. And the truth is, it was eggshells. Every day felt like I'm on trial. And I'm sure they felt the same way. Well, my counselor actually said, "I'm actually treating you for PTSD," because everything was a trigger that felt like, oh no, it feels like that. It feels like that. It feels like that. See, nothing changed or you'll never change. And so I had to go like, okay, it's not that. It's not that. And they had to do the same. They had to do the same thing.

The other thing is, because I know I did this, I think some people said, this is what I think I'm supposed to say because it would be Christian and expected, but their hearts hadn't changed or whatever. So some of that I didn't find out for a year later. I think everybody said, "We're going to give this a try," but for every leader that has to come back into this situation, if you think it's going to be unicorns and rainbows and it's like going to camp and we're all going to sing a song and forgive each other and move on and go, let's just put it behind us, it's not reality.

I came back in January and COVID shuts the world down in March. So now just don't forget COVID happen. Okay? So now that just makes everything else just more and more and more chaotic. We're not having relational time because the offices are closed down and our services are closed down. And now really the only people I'm seeing are production teams in offsite recording facilities with mask on their face. We're really not doing a lot of relational repair here. Are we? Right? We're just trying to get crap done because we got to put out something for the weekend online service.

And so that delayed a bunch of stuff. And then, so in July, after I came back from sabbatical, March, April, May, June, July, we're four or five months into COVID. And now we face what every church faces. The paradigm is different and we don't know when it's ever going to be the same. All I know is, I'm paying salaries for 175 people for five campuses that aren't meeting. And we don't know when they are going to meet again. And so we threw out the option and I want to hear-

Jim:

So we threw out the option, and I want to hear this, because everybody talks about staff layoffs and that's a wrong, bad terminology. We looked at our staff and went, "We don't know what the future looks like. We're not worried. God has it all." But maybe this is a season where you go, "Hey, I think my season here is done." And if that's you, then self-select. We'll take really good care of you out the door.

So, I'm on my summer break and the lead team comes up and says, "Okay, here's the list of people that are probably going to do this. There's a few that we probably need to kind of like, 'Hey, no, your time is really done.' There's a few on there, but we want to give everybody an opportunity." And they took me through the whole list of all those people.

And my son was on it. My son worked in our spiritual formation department and I'm sitting there going, but it made sense. Relationally it's just, and emotionally it was horrible, but I trust you guys. It made sense. So the week that it was supposed to happen, I'm on break. And a friend had invited me to go fishing with him in Alaska and his dad owns a place there. And I said, "Okay, this sounds like it could be brutal. I can cancel that." And they're like, "No, go, go, go." And I said, "What do you think it's going to be?" And, "We think 12, 13, 15 people will probably self-select and then we'll have to have the hard conversations, but we can do that when you get back." I'm like, "Okay, are you sure?" Right. So I go to Alaska and I'm catching salmon and my wife's catching our first fish ever.

And we're posting pictures like, Hey, and then I start getting these social media comments going, "It's pretty cold hearted that half your staff's gotten fired and you're up on a fishing trip." And I'm like, "Huh? What?" And so I don't know what's going on. So then I break code and I email back and go, "Yeah, there's actually more than that. On Tuesday after you get back, we're going to kind have all the staff come together and kind of just have closure around it." I'm like, "Okay. I'm at Mayo clinic next week because part of my sabbatical comeback is an executive physical that took 10 months to get I'll cancel it. Do I need to be there? Because I'll be there. Because this seems like a big deal." "No, no, no, no, no, no, no. You just go to your physical. No problem."

I come back to my physical from Scottsdale. I fly back in a day early and I'm driving to work and I see two of my staff people walking down the sidewalk near my house and I'm like, "Hey." And they turn their heads and walk away and I'm like, "This isn't good." And I walk into my office and I see a couple lead team people. I went, "Yeah. So what's going on?" "Well, 65 people resigned." I'm like, "What? What? I thought you said 16." "No, 65 people resigned." And I'm like, "Oh, all right, so what about Tuesday?" "Yeah, it was really, really, really emotional." "You told them where I was?" "No." "What?"

"Yeah." "They thought I was fishing while they were having a funeral for our staff." And I'm like, "I didn't know." And one of my leaders looked at me and went, "Why didn't you know?" And I was like, "Because you told me that you had it and that I needed to go do the things." And the following week in staff meeting, we're in there and I feel like I'm walking into an execution and my lead team stood up and went, "Time out. We did not set this guy up well. This is on us. Not him. Here's what really happened. Here's the timeline. Here's what we should have done. And we dropped the ball. This is not his fault." And one of my younger staffs who raised their hand and went, "Well, thank you because I thought where the blank is my pastor." And I'm looked at her and went, "I would think the same thing."

I would think the same thing if half my friends it felt like had lost their jobs or their careers or their ministries and my leader was off playing golf or off on a fishing trip, I would've felt the same thing. That's not my heart. You've got to hear that. And they were like, "We know it's not. We knew it wasn't your heart, but we just didn't know." And that's the moment. So that was in July before I think any healing actually ever even began. And it was when my lead team said, "We support this guy. We didn't do it well." And then slowly people begin to own, Hey, around, we've all got stuff to own in this. And we all have apologies to make. There's part of me, Carey, it goes like, I wish I didn't need to hear apologies.

I wish I didn't need to hear people own their stuff. But the human side of me is like I do. One of the big learnings is you can be wounded secondhand, you can't heal secondhand. That has to happen one on one. That's facetime. There is no shortcut. You can't do a blanket apology to everybody and everybody hear it. Individuals have been hurt. I'm going to pick a team, that accounting team, that's the most general, that accounting team really, I really hurt them or whatever it is. It's not like I can apologize

to the accounting team. I have to apologize to Lena and to Molly and go, "Hey I need to own this. And I know that fell on you hard."

And as a senior leader, I wish we didn't need well, I need to own that back towards you too. But you kind of do because there's a human beings and ministry. There's a relational.

Jesse:

Well that's reconciliation. Is it not?

Jim:

Yeah, it is. And that Jesus was pretty smart. It's like just go face to face with somebody and work out your stuff, do it while you're still with him on the way, otherwise you're going to end up in jail. And it's like, there is no shortcut. There is no shortcut back to healing. It is long. It took a long way to get there in a speech or a blanket statement is not going to do the trick. Now can we move on? The answer is no we can't.

You have thoughts around that. Even at our leader retreat this past week, this one, a new leader who wasn't here for sabbatical, he was raising his hand like, "I thought we were past that." See, he didn't go through all that with us. "I thought we were past that. And those and those people aren't here anymore." And I went, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Just because we're past it doesn't mean there's not lingering, 'Oh no it feels like that again.' We all have that."

Jesse:

Yeah. I think it still comes up. And I think for anybody to think, we all thought, "Hey Jim, he's gone for six months. He comes back and it's going to be better. He's going to be better. We're going to be better." Our worst moment as a staff wasn't before sabbatical, it was six months after sabbatical where we were at our worst, because I think so many people were at fault for where we were, but nobody wanted to own it. And so subconsciously we're just pointing fingers at everybody else. And I mean, Carey, when 60 some people raise their hand and say, "Hey, I would rather be jobless than work at the church because of the environment that's been created."

I think that was a moment where all of us, it wasn't just Jim, it wasn't just the leadership team, but it was everybody who realized whether it was activity or the sin of passivity, or it was this judgementalism that was like, "I would never do this. I can't believe you would be like this or Jim would be like that." And people can feel that type of judgementalism. It just fractured us. And so that six months after sabbatical was our lowest point. And then we realized we have to be so intentional about our culture, how we interact together from this point forward. And it's been two years since that moment now, and it feels healthy. It feels healthier. We still have so much work to do. Our staff would tell you that, but at the same time, we've had to put probably more work into our staff culture than we put into the weekends, than we put into the campus. We've had a focus on it.

Jim:

I remember coming back and finding out about the layoffs and I went, "Wait, they left? They left?" Because here is my mentality. I had fought. I had done hard work for those six months and I'm showing up every day, I am doing my best. I am fighting. I am getting healthier and I am submitting myself. And it sounds like I'm patting myself on my back. I'm just working hard. And then people that I had done 10, 12 years, 13 years of ministry with, married their babies, walked through their affairs, go walk through suicides in their family, walk through their addictions, walk through their betrayals, walk through

married them, all that kind of stuff. There was not a thank you or screw you. They just left. And I'm like, "What?"

Again, I just think I need to lead some leaders off the mat and go, "Dude, you're a human being and relationship and betrayal hurts." I don't think that Jesus at the table knowing Judas was about to totally deny him was chipper about it. I think it was like, do what you have to do. He's like, "You're breaking my heart." It's like, there's a human side of that that we try to over spiritualize and try to say it shouldn't matter or move on. It is a healing process and it's not quick. It still happens. I still get triggered.

Carey:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, this is what I think is so rare about this story and so hopeful about this story. Normally when stories like this get told you're out of the picture, Jim, you've gone off to another church or into retirement or whatever, and you're telling your version of it and somebody else is left with a mop and a bucket picking up the pieces. And what is so rare is that you are back there facing your demons, facing the people who let you down and facing the people you let down and saying, we're going to try to figure this out together in the name of the gospel. And I just think it's so rare. Where I'd like to maybe land the plane is there are leaders listening who are saying, "Oh man, we are where you were in 2018, 2019. And we don't have anything close to a resolution at this point."

And the one thing that is encouraging, you said your governance wasn't perfect and you made a lot of mistakes and you're revising it now and you're changing your culture, but at least your governance intervened and got this moving in the end in a more positive direction. You said you may not have listened if somebody came to try to do an intervention, but knowing what you know now for leaders who are listening, who may say, "Hey, we're in a similar position. We have a toxic senior pastor, senior leader in the church, toxic board, whatever it happens to be." And they don't see it. What advice do you have to them?

Jim:

First of all, be very careful and choose your moment. And that moment will be after a lot of thought and even maybe some counseling about, "Hey, this is what I'm feeling, how should I articulate this?" Then I would pick. So let's say a junior person on staff has some energy around decision or what a posture, whatever it is. One is pick your moment really, really, really carefully. And don't use any accusative language because a person in my position who's feeling the pressure of carrying the ball or whatever is going to get defensive really, really, really fast. Everybody this side of Jesus is if you put a finger in my chest, you're going to get a chest full back. You just are. You call it insecurity or they should be more mature in that blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Okay. It's a human being who's feeling the pressure.

And one of the symptoms of his pressure fell on you. So your posture needs to be come in of help me understand. Those are my favorite three words. Put that in your marriage handbook and your parenting handbook in dealing with your parent handbook, in dealing with whatever it is, if you would lead with, "Help me understand" as opposed to "Why in the world did you do that?" You wrote the same answer, right? So help me understand. And here's what I mean, my understanding was, this is how we had this agreement or this is what we agreed to do, or this is what happens when, and it didn't feel like that happened. Help me understand what changed or why you changed it. I'm sure I'll rip off Andy Stanley here is one of the nuggets of gold is all the gold mine that's come out of that guy is he was talking about parenting is like when Andrew's a little kid or whatever that it was, Andrew would come and say like, "Hey dad, can I go to the mall?"

Or Andy would say, "Hey, mow the yard." And Andrew's response, his son's response would be, "Yes, sir. Dad, can I ask a question?" So the answer is obedience. "I'm on board dad, right? I have a question. Help me understand, right. Yesterday, you said I could go to the mall from three to six and I could mow the yard the next day. Did something change? I'm submitting to your leadership, whatever. But we had an agreement yesterday. It felt like it changed today. Just helped me understand. Because I'll mow the yard." And then says, "You're right. I forgot about that. Go to the mall. You can mow on Wednesday." And so when somebody comes in and says, "Does that make sense?" It's like, "You screwed up. You're a liar, Jim, you're a bad leader." That's what I'll hear if you put a finger in my chest at the wrong moment.

If you come in and go like, "Hey, help me understand something because here's the paradigm I was operating under. We said that unless it was a, just a blah, blah moment our service was then locked in on Thursday. And the last three Saturdays you've changed the service. I'm sure you have your reasons. Can you help me understand?" Because maybe you don't know. I don't know what it takes. I said this on the MXU podcast a while back deals with church technology and sound people. I don't know why I'm asking when I say, "Can you change the song?" If you ask my mom, the church, bring us to change the song, she just turned to another page in the hymnal. That's all it meant. Okay. When I say change the song now, there's eight hours of tracking and triggering and computers. And then it has to be moved to this song.

And then there's a video with lyrics that has to be reedited. So the answer is, "Yes, Jim, you don't know what you're asking because now nine people don't go home this weekend because you want to flip a song." Now, if you tell me that, don't change the song. But if you don't give me feedback, you don't have Saturdays anymore because you're reworking songs, the senior leader doesn't know the cost many times. Guys, we have to admit that we don't know the cost of what it takes to put on a weekend because we do hours. We do our homework and we walk up and they shine thousands of dollars of lights and microphones. And then they pipe it out through the internet and we have no idea what it costs, but we go, "Hey, just flip that." You just took 24 hours of somebody's life away from them.

So the one thing would be the leader is be a learner. There's a lot you don't know because you're isolated at the top. I just don't know. For the person coming up to the tower to address the king, you know what I mean by that, is take the posture of a learner and understand I'm trying to understand, and you're going to get a much better response than if you put a finger in that person's chest. So that would be the one thing. I think that answers your question is we've got to have a posture. I'm sure he has a list. Here's how you deal with this guy.

Jesse:

I would say that if I look back on that season, what I wish I would've done differently, I would've said number one, I would've looked internally and thought, "Okay, how am I contributing to us being where we are in a negative light so that I have a little bit of self-perspective." The second thing that I would do is I try to empathize with this is the weight. This is the pressure. These might be the thoughts that Jim's having rather than just assuming the worst about him. And then I think honors just really important walking, "Hey, I'm for you. I'm trying to support you. I'm not against you." And then I think what Jim said, help me understand, but not necessarily. I remember a sad person asking me help me understand. And it was phrased in a way that was help me understand how you could be that stupid. And for me it's like help me understand in a curious way.

Jim:

Assuming there's a reason.

Jesse:

Right. I'm assuming that you know what you're doing. I'm assuming that you have a good reason for this. And so I'm trying to figure it out and I'm trying to reline to see things how you're seeing it. And I think that when we do that than leaders are so much more open to going, "Actually I was just making it up as I went or actually I made this decision because of this, do you have any ideas?" And so I think that's what I would do. And then at the end of the day, if you do that and nothing happens, do not stay too long. I've seen so many leaders, they stay too long and then they get bitter. And when they get bitter, they actually get destructive. And our culture wants to see the church fall. Our culture wants to see leaders in the church fall, where Jesus wants to see the church thrive. Jesus wants to see leaders be written into redemptive stories.

And so if you can't participate in a redemptive story for your leader, don't give the culture what culture wants. Instead, step aside and go somewhere where you can serve faithfully and serve and be excited about it.

Carey:

Wow. That is really good advice because I think eventually you become part of that toxic culture. I agree. And if the leader is not open or you can't have that conversation, that almost triggers the alternate scenario we talked about much earlier in the interview, Jim, where had there not been the intervention and you not been open, this could have gone in a very different direction. Jim, I want to give you the final word. To the leader who's listening, senior pastor, senior leader, CEO, business leader who's like, "I am you where you were three years ago. And I saw myself in the mirror in these couple of hours." What is your word to that leader who is not healthy? And maybe for the first time just realized, "Ooh my gosh, that's me."

Jim:

Everybody understands what there's nobody else in your organization that lays their head on the pillow, and thinks about all the things that you have to think about. There's nobody else in the organization that has to handle your responsibility, it all lands on your desk. And that is a very heavy place. It's a heavy look and everything within us, what it feels like we have to prove that we can do it by ourself and God never told us we were supposed to do it. It was not God telling us to do it and not God is always destructive. And because enough charisma enough passion that you could run your church and not consult God for a year and then a day will come when you can't and then you'll look around just you'll panic and you'll just keep on going. Then your legs will buckle and then you'll lose everything. And if I got a do over, the magic do over, it would be like I would get counsel, I isolated myself from other people in my situation because I told myself I don't need anybody. It was fear.

I don't want to tell anybody that I'm scared. I did a retreat for young pastors up at my cabin and we surveyed them. 14 out of 14 says, "I'm figuring it out as I go. The only thing I feel good about is my preaching." Knowledge. And I see that what you're carrying is hard for a human being to do. And if God is good, until you ask him for help, you were, we were never created to be rock stars, but they keep trying to make us rock stars. Right? That celebrity, and they will continue to try to treat us like celebrity, it's too heavy and it'll crush you and leaders go first. I'm just telling you it'll crush you. Right?

And so people out there, there's some bad leadership coaches. There are cohorts. I'm in a cohort with, I hate to use the word mega churches across the country, and we have nothing to prove because it's like, we all got big churches. How are you? And it's like, it's so refreshing to just go like, "I

don't care how big." That we went to that retreat you were talking about down in Mexico, right? That's just the answer. Right? Because nobody cares.

How are you looking at succession? How are you looking with conflict? How are you older guys dealing with millennials, dealing with the old guys? And it's like, we're having those conversations. It feels like a noble and right thing to do. It's very short lived. So it's not weak to say you need help, to say that you don't know what to do next. And if your relationships, I've got this here, it doesn't mean you're a weak leader if you ask for help. And I had to learn that the hard way. The wisest thing I ever did was surround myself with people, and Christ's love. I can come back to that. I can't go. He's not real. And I can't be a rockstar, Jim. I can just be who God's wired me to be. He loves it. But we are a good team. I like leading in. I hate it when it's collaborative, collaborative. It's like, "No, it's not." It gets better. But it's a learned thing.

I learned it and leading right now with Jesse, I say, I say this because I want to, I could do this for a long time, but there was a day man on May 19, I thought it was over. I was really redemptive and redemptive and the holy spirit is really redemptive. And it's a good story. It's still playing out. It is possible. It is. I'm experiencing it.

Carey:

Guys listen, I really appreciate it. I think you really helped a lot of leaders. And my prayer is that you also helped the church get healthier. That's why we're doing this conversation. I can't thank you both enough for your transparency and your honesty. Thank you.

What's so amazing about this conversation to me is it just doesn't happen. At least it doesn't happen very often. I mean, normally a guy like Jim would just not come back, not take responsibility. And guys like Jesse are left picking up the mess. And for Jim to come back, have the humility to submit, to grow, to face the people that he hurt and to say, "We're going to make a better day." Don't you kind of wish that the script that we just saw this more and more in churches, in businesses in organizations? And I cannot thank Jim and Jesse enough for their honesty in that conversation.

I so appreciate it. If you want more, we've got show notes for you. You can go to careynieuwhof.com/episode515, and you'll find everything there including transcripts. And we want to thank our partners for this show as well. Pro MediaFire would love for you to book your free consultation and you can let the pros grow your social media. All you have to do is go to ProMediaFire.com/carey. And ministry grid wants to give you \$200 off their regular pricing when you get all your volunteer training done for you, coordinated for you, by going to ministrygrid.com/carey. That's ministrygrid.com/carey.

Next episode, Michael McCain. Michael was the CEO for a number of years of maple leaf foods. He talks about leading through crisis. And so many other things. Here is an excerpt.

Michael McCain:

Short-termism is one of the most perverse and destructive dimensions of modern capitalism. Do I care about the next quarter and the next year? Yeah, of course I do. You want to win the Stanley cup? You need to win games along the way. You can't just be focused on the cup, right? You got to win some games along the way. Of course you do. But the decisions we make, the key decisions we make, I'm focused on generational transfer.

Carey:

Also coming up on the podcast, we have Jeff Henderson, Stephen M.R. Covey, Cynt Marshall, Tim Tebow, Patrick Lencioni, Rich Birch, Rory Vaden, Chris Anderson from Ted Talks and so much more. And I want to thank you so much for listening and for sharing this episode. I also want to tell you about something I'm very excited about. Change, and I know change can be a really intimidating word, but if you want to lead change well, I've got something brand new called The Art of Leading Change and it will help you get a complete step by step framework for leading change without the opposition, the pushback and the confusion that you would experience so often. I have basically been leading change for almost three decades. I take everything I've learned in this brand new course called The Art of Leading Change. And I'd love for you to get in on it.

And you know what? I'm going to throw in a bonus for you. You can get the course and buy that a la cart, or you can get The Art of Leadership Academy and you will get not only the Art of Leading Change, but all of my courses in community and monthly training and access to me and so much more for the same price. So if you want the course, go to the artofleadingchange.com. If you want the academy, click the academy option when you're in there and you will get that and so much more. I'd love to see you. We have incentive pricing on, but it only lasts until August 31st. So make sure you get in there, go to the artofleadingchange.com right now and get in before the price goes up.

Thank you so much for listening everybody. We are back with a fresh episode next time, and our hope or time together today has helped you thrive in life and leadership.