

Announcer:

The Art of Leadership Network.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Welcome to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership podcast. It's Carey here, and it's so good to have you on this episode. I hope our time together today helps you thrive in life and leadership. We've got a great guest today, Tyler Staton. First time on the podcast. I'll tell you more about that. And we are going to go into some really interesting places today.

Today's episode is brought to you by Pro MediaFire. You can get your communications and creative work done for less than the cost of a staff hire. Book your free consultation today by going to [promediafire.com/carey](http://promediafire.com/carey).

And by Convoy of Hope. You and your church can help provide relief supplies to victims of natural disasters and other crises by going to [convoyofhope.org/donate](http://convoyofhope.org/donate).

Well, we're going to talk about transition. So Tyler Staton took over for John Mark Comer at Bridgetown Church, and transitions almost never go well. Well, we're going to go under the hood and find out what happened, and it's actually pretty moving how well this one went. It's great to have good examples because we have so many bad examples of bad transitions. I mean you can look at everything that happened at Disney with Bob Iger coming back, to a lot of pastoral transitions that did not go particularly well. This one seems to have gone really well, and it gets moving at times as Tyler tells his story.

We're going to talk about three kinds of biblical discernment, and why prayer is more important than sermon prep. I don't know. Every once in a while because I'm a Christian and we interview people of faith and also people who are not Christians on this podcast, but every once in a while an episode feels like church, and this one felt like church by the end of it. So I hope you are as impacted by it as much as I did. And I love having guests like Tyler on. He's the national director of 24-7 Prayer USA. Also, the lead pastor of Bridgetown Church. He's passionate about pursuing prayer in the honest realities of day-to-day life. His latest book is *Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools: An Invitation to the Wonder and Mystery of Prayer and Searching for Enough*. He has several other books.

Wow, this is good for me. And I'll tell you why it's good for me. I recently redid my spiritual gifting and I am not very good at prayer. I mean, I pray every day. I read my Bible every day, but it is my second lowest spiritual gift, and underneath it is mercy, so there you go. I mean that's why I need guys like Tyler Staton in my life. I'm sure it's his top gift. Surprise, surprise, mine is leadership. Okay, there you go. But it's not that I can't pray, it's just I think a lot of leaders really struggle with their prayer life. So I pray every day, I do, but I'm not very good at it.

So anyway, I love conversations like this and *Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools* is a fantastic book as well. So question for you. If you're a church leader or you're a business leader, are your current staff overwhelmed or have you just had a staff member leave? Turnover's at an all time high, and that leaves a lot of organizations, particularly churches, struggling with communication and creative work. How do you get it done? Well, what if you could get it done for less than the cost of a staff hire with Pro MediaFire? There's no cost to health benefits, payroll taxes, no risks of needing to scramble. You got two weeks notice, who you are going to get?

So this is what you get if you go with Pro MediaFire. You can get their help in a custom website design and weekly website maintenance, complete social media management, graphic design, video creation and digital growth strategy. And the consultation is free. So just go to [promediafire.com/carey](http://promediafire.com/carey), where you can learn more, get your free consult. That's [promediafire.com/carey](http://promediafire.com/carey). And I talk to so many leaders

who want to make a huge difference in the world, but the question is how. That's why partners like Convoy of Hope are so helpful. They're still very active in Ukraine, helping war victims there. And they're also on the ground with victims of Hurricane Ian. And basically, if there's a problem, they're there. So Convoy of Hope has served over 100,000 people in Europe this year alone. Additionally, they have a long history of responding to storms in the Caribbean. Local teams and warehouses are on several of the islands, and they allow Convoy to respond immediately. So when you donate to Convoy, you provide basic needs like food, hygiene supplies, feminine supplies, baby, medical supplies, blankets, bedding, clothing, and so much more. If you want to be on the ground or your church does, they're the ideal partner. Go to [convoyofhope.org/donate](https://convoyofhope.org/donate). That's [convoyofhope.org/donate](https://convoyofhope.org/donate).

Well, now, my really rich and meaningful conversation with Tyler Staton.

Tyler, welcome to the podcast. It's just great to have you here.

Tyler Staton:

Thank you. I'm delighted to be with you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, it's nice to be able to hang out a little bit and I'd love to, we're going to get into prayer. I'd told you before we hit record, I think it's the best book on prayer I've ever read. And normally, I surface read books to get ready for the interview, and you had me doing a deep dive wishing that I could read every single word, and I came close and it's going up on my shelf and it's going come out.

Tyler Staton:

Man, that is such a blessing. You should have written an endorsement as it came out.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, next time hit me up. You're a great writer. Seriously, you're a great writer.

Tyler Staton:

Thank you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And it was very interesting. And I've tried different books on prayer, no shade on other authors, but it's fantastic. But I want to start with the transition because you're the lead pastor of Bridgetown Church in Portland. And a year-ish ago you took over from John Mark Comer, who was the previous lead pastor. Can you take us back? Let's go back to where and how that conversation started. As John Mark started to think about his future, you're pretty happy in New York, right? Was it Brooklyn you were at?

Tyler Staton:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So how did that conversation start?

Tyler Staton:

So John Mark is a good friend of mine. He's one of my very closest friends. So we began to collaborate on different teachings we were doing together and shared initiatives that they were doing at Bridgetown, we were doing Oaks Church Brooklyn, which is the church that I was pastoring. And so we were regularly in touch. And then it was early in the pandemic, during this phase in the pandemic, at least for pastors like John Mark and I, we were going to an empty building with two other staff members and preaching to a camera alone on Sundays, and trying to figure out is this thing going to be over in a few weeks?

And John Mark just called me out of nowhere. And anytime someone... I feel like when someone calls you if you're a millennial or younger, you're like, "Oh no, there's been a death or something." And so I get a call and a voicemail from John Mark. And I'm like, "Oh my word, what has happened to him?" So I call him back, it was a Sunday afternoon. And yeah, he said, "Hey, I've thought about this forever. I've talked with you about it, but I feel like now is the right time for me to step away pastorally. And on behalf of our elder board, I want to see if you're interested in my job." And I just started laughing and I said, "Not at all. I'm really flattered, man, but not all." I was like, "I'm so happy in New York. I'm not going anywhere." And he said, "I know. I told her our elders that's what you would say. Will you please pray about it for a week before you tell me absolutely not?" And I said, "Sure."

And that week, God did some very unexpected things, kind of whispers to both me and my wife, not that made us think we're called to Bridgetown, but that made us think we should be open to this and enter a discernment process. So it was at that point that we invited a couple of our local elders here in Brooklyn that had been on the whole journey of planting a community and growing that up and everything into it with us immediately. Because I just thought, I don't even feel right about entertaining this idea without doing so in community. And we went through a very long, months long deep, slow discernment process that ultimately landed us on saying, "Okay. We think this is God's invitation."

And it was more grief filled than excitement filled at first. We were not trying to get out of Brooklyn. We didn't want to pastor another community. We had planted a church and pastored it for seven years, and our best friends were in community with us, our kids were growing up alongside one another, all those sorts of things. It felt like we were living the dream and God was inviting us into a different dream. And so that's the shortest possible version of a long and twisting and unexpected journey that we walked.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What were a couple of the weird things that happened to get you to at least open your mind to it, if you're comfortable sharing?

Tyler Staton:

The first is, so I went on a prayer walk. Prayer walking is kind of a spiritual pathway for me, a way that I've known the voice of God from a young age. And it was as simple as this. We said, "Let's take this one Saturday and let's each set aside an hour to try to be alone with God. And then on Saturday evening, after our kids are in bed, we'll share with one another what that experience was like." And neither of us was expecting some great revelation. But almost immediately, as I began to prayer walk, I felt like God used this one phrase that occurs a couple of times in the Psalms, "You have set my feet down in a broad place." And just the spirit bring that to mind. And then immediately God bring my children to mind.

I'm the father of three boys, six, four and seven months, no eight months now. Only two boys at that point. But God bring my children to mind and begin to reveal some things to me about who he has uniquely made them, that this phrase was connected to. And not necessarily say Portland was the soil to plant them in where they would flourish, but just make me begin to wonder, have I planted them in the

soil where they will flourish? And then a very similar thing related to my wife, as I continue to walk. And I think I began to process with God for the first time, have I planted the people that I get to love most closely in the soil where they will most flourish or have I planted them in the soil where I am flourishing?

And that was for me the thing I began to process. And that felt like a question that God was bringing to mind, not was coming to mind just out of my own psyche. And it felt important enough to say, "Okay. I think I need to not just stop this conversation here." And then for my wife, it was related to fear. She named that she had fear related to the goodness of God, and that she was fearful that God had been so good to us in Brooklyn, she couldn't imagine life being better. And that if God was calling us elsewhere, then it must be a desert season he's calling us to or a time of suffering. And she was afraid of God's invitation being anything other than what it had been. And we both were able to note, okay, that's a dysfunctional thought about God, that is not derived from the truth of his character as it's revealed to us in scripture or our life experience to this point, so we should think about this more.

And so I called John Mark and we're close enough that I told him those things and I said, "So look, here's what I think is going on. I think God is using your invitation to us to open up really important conversations between us and God and between us and one another, but I don't think we're going to do this. So I'm saying yes to further discernment, but I don't want to lead you on and for you to put all your eggs in this basket. You should keep looking for a successor." And he was like, "Okay, let's go for it." And that's kind of how things proceeded from there.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'm sure we could spend the entire podcast talking about the call process, discernment process, but was there a particular turning point or a particular moment that made you realize, "Uh-oh. I think we're heading on over to Portland."?

Tyler Staton:

Yeah, there was a very clear moment for me. So I know of three types of discernment, really, because discernment is such a strange term. I feel like most Western evangelicals use the term discernment as a way of saying, "I already know what I'm going to do, but before I do it I'm going to pray. And then if God brings a billboard along the highway that tells me to do the opposite, then I might reconsider." But I know biblically in a church history, there's three kinds of discernment. There's like the Gideon fleece situation. There is wisdom in the council of many, so inviting community to discern with you. And then there's Ignatian discernment, which is about inviting God to move your heart in a particular direction over a period of time as you hold a question before him day in and day out. And so we did all three. We were trying to operate by all three.

And we had this one trip to Portland where we were going to leave either that night or the following morning, and I felt God speaking me through the scripture. The passage I happened to be reading that morning was about when Jesus sends out either the 12 or the 72, I don't recall exactly which one. And he says, "If your peace rests, stay. And if it doesn't, dust your feet off and go to the next town." And I just began to ask God, "What does it mean for my peace to rest on a place?" And I felt like, for me, God began to uncover deep desires that were within me. And three very particular hyper-specific ideas came to mind. And I just held them secretly. I wrote them in my journal. And I said, "Okay, I want to hold on to these three prayers."

Now I could go into what they all are, but it would be a very long story. So I'll just say there was three things-

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'm open.

Tyler Staton:

Well, okay, there's these three things. One was related to... I'm going to give the general idea, was the hill I feel like I will die on as a pastor. And saying, "Okay, if these people not just are okay with this defining culture of a church, but if they're not enlivened, yes, let's go after that together, then this isn't where God's calling me." The second was related to my wife. And if this doesn't happen to her while we're in Portland, God isn't calling us there. And then the last was related to a personal prayer I was holding before. So I said to God, and I don't even know if this is okay, but I said, "Okay, God, I can't leave the community that I've planted unless you are more clear with me than you've ever been. I need more than a whisper. I need you to knock me on my back. So I'm going to pray these three prayers and I'm not going to share them with anyone. And if you're calling us, then in the seven days we're going to spend in Portland," because we were going there to meet with the elders and that stuff, I just said, "I want you to answer all three in a very clear way. And if you do not, I will not do this because I cannot do this."

I've never made a decision that so many other people will be affected by without a say in the decision. And that's what I felt I needed from him. So I come to Portland, and not only were all three of those prayers answered, they were all answered in the first 24 hours. And when the third and final one was answered, which was the personal one, I was alone. It was answered through a phone call from my father, and I was alone walking down the sidewalk back to the Airbnb that we were staying in. And I just doubled over weeping. And it was those tears of like, "Oh my word, I'm in the presence of the Lord." And it was tears of grief at the same time of like, "Oh no, I'm going to say goodbye to everyone that I love, and to a vision of my life that I think I had settled on without really consulting God very much," which was to pastor the same church for decades, and then someone scatter my ashes in Brooklyn one day.

And I think that's what I admired in my unconscious, unarticulated mind. And it felt like, "Oh, that's not the story I'm being invited to live." And so yeah, I remember that moment vividly. And then there was a whole lot of conversation and decision making that had to come from that place and we had to all arrive there together, not just me, but that was for me, the turning point and a moment I'll never forget. And now that I live in Portland, I sometimes pass that block that happened on, and it feels like holy ground to me. Every time I drive past it or go on a morning run and pass it or something, I think like, "Wow, that's where God kind put the nail in the coffin and called us here in a way that I couldn't deny."

Carey Nieuwhof:

I really appreciate you sharing that and it made me tear up a little bit, Tyler. I think you're right. I think calling often is, "Oh, here's my nice little strategy and plan and, hopefully, God, you'll bless it." But it brought me back to that journey from law into ministry, which I fought for years, like years. Questioning, thinking, "There's no way," realizing it was downward mobility, but also underneath that was a great uncertainty. And God in a period of years just making it so clear through circumstances and answers, so to speak, that you just couldn't humanly engineer if you tried on it.

And again, like you say, it'd be a very long podcast. But I think that's really good to know because it's so countercultural. We look to God for our stamp of approval, rather than for a real testing of our will. And having gone through a very similar prayer and calling process recently, as in this year, going in a different direction than I thought my life would go. So that's a good word, man. That's a good word. Well, transitions are never easy. What went well? When you were actually making the exchange, leaving

Oaks Church, embracing Bridgetown, saying goodbye to John Mark, passing the baton, all of those things, what worked? What went well?

Tyler Staton:

I feel that both of the communities that each of us were leaving blessed us in our going. I mean it was hard sitting down and having so many individual conversations, retelling the same story. Everyone reacts to change differently. And I think to me, one of the hardest things about being a pastor, this is probably true of any form of leadership, but my experience in leadership is as a pastor, and one of the hardest things is everyone has a different set of expectations for you, but no one tells you exactly what they are. And so I felt that I was finding out who I was to different people as I was letting them know that I was going to not be that person to them anymore. And that was interesting to walk through. And it was emotionally exhausting, and I felt an incredible amount of gratitude for...

You realize the church is about relationship more than any other time if you're saying goodbye. And you realize the people that God has woven into your story, the ways they've blessed you, the ways you've gotten to bless them, the hard things you've walked through and made it through together, and you just realize, "This is it. This is what the whole thing is about." And then I got to be really blessed and sent... We went through that process I think in a slow and in a healthy way, so that when the day came that I was preaching my last sermon and saying goodbye, I felt celebrated and loved and blessed and sent out, not reluctantly let go of. And then I got to arrive for John Mark doing that same process, and I got to witness him be blessed and sent, and his whole family be blessed and sent. So I think that went really, really well.

Another thing that went really well that was key was John Mark and I were good friends going into this thing. And I can remember saying to him, "All right, man, we're either going to be much better friends or probably not friends at all by the time we're done with this." And I feel that God was unbelievably kind in our friendship, and that we did not trust ourselves but put in a lot of best practices to say, "Let's make sure that on the other side of this, that we love each other and have blessed each other." And that has happened. I would say my friendship with him, which was quite close before, is 10 times closer than it was. And last week I was going through something and I didn't quite know what to do, and he's the person that I called. So I think there's a deep, very real friendship between he and I that was able to withstand this and I think hold a lot of it as well.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What were some of the things you did at Oaks Church and John Mark may have done at Bridgetown to get people ready for your departure? Because that's not easy. It's basically grieving. If you're a loved pastor, you've got to walk people through grief, through news they don't want to hear, and get them to the point where they can wish you well. How did that go for you guys? What did you do?

Tyler Staton:

We did a whole lot of individual or small-group relational conversations. So we just made sure that the people that would be most affected by this news heard from us in a format where they could ask whatever they wanted to ask, and we could kind of talk it out. I wanted to make sure that I presented myself as an open book. So this isn't a corporate decision that you're finding out about in the most mass and impersonal way, but this is a deeply-personal family decision and so I want you to know, and then I think we made space for people to grieve. It's okay if you're mad at me about it's okay if you're sad. It's okay if you're kind of excited for the next season of the church here. However you respond is okay, but I'm here to walk through the response with you in any way that is healthy.

And I think the thing that I didn't do that I look back on, I think this was good, is I also realized that I couldn't pastor people through me leaving. That wasn't a healthy role to play. You can't punch someone in the face and then hug them immediately afterwards. And that's what it often felt like. And so I think within our staff team, they found out with several months of runway before even the closest leaders to our church found out and our elders. And so those people knew who I was talking to and when I was talking to them, and then they pastored people through it. And in particular, my associate pastor, Gemma, I will never know how many hours she sat with people and lovingly listened to them and cared for them and probably defended me, and corrected misconceptions, and answered questions because she knew every detail.

So I think just going through something relationally so that the day when a broad announcement is made, everyone who will really be affected in a deep way, not only knows, but they've already processed knowing because I think then we understood they're going to be the people that pastor everyone else through this. And so I think just tiering communication like that, and doing so not just in a strategic way, though it is that, but also doing so in a deeply-relational way, was slow and painstaking and hard, but really good.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think that's so wise. How did you figure that out? I mean that's a really smart process.

Tyler Staton:

Through learning from others who had done it well. You mentioned you don't see a lot of it done well, but I think one place has been done well is at New Life Fellowship in Queens, New York where Pete Scazzero transitioned to Rich Villodas. And Pete mentored me for a couple years, and Rich is a friend of mine because they're just two miles up the road from where my church was. And so he was the first call that I made and the first call John Mark made, and he played a major role in helping us understand how to do this. He also connected us with a guy named Dave Travis, who is a church transition consultant, who helped map a lot of the journey for us and helped us see where we were naive. And didn't just prescribe a journey, but immersed himself in the life of both churches, to learn both churches, so that the journey could be unique to the community. So yeah, those were the things.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's great. What were some of the stress points or challenge points for you personally for John Mark or for your congregations? Those times are hard no matter what.

Tyler Staton:

Yeah, I mean, gosh, this is quite vulnerable, but just to be completely honest, the challenge for me was what I was saying before, I think I everyone has... Or I don't know if everyone does. I imagine that everyone has people, or ideas, or ways of being they admire and that they want to become, that maybe they haven't even acknowledged to themselves, like this is where I'm aiming. And for me, I always really admired some kind of journey like that of Eugene Peterson. Where I looked at the American Church. And I thought, "You know what? This thing has become way too pastor driven. I read the pages of the New Testament and people know about the character of the community, not the name and content of the pastor. So I want to serve humbly, in a hidden way. I want to live a long obedience in the same direction and I want to inherit a fruitful harvest in a local place. That's who I want to become."

And not only was God calling me somewhere else and that involved a death, but I knew that God was calling me to what looked like an objective strong career move. And that was the thing I most detested being perceived as and the thing I most did not want to become. And so there was a death for me in that. You know what? Some people are going to think this about me, and it's the thing I'm most don't want thought about me. And at the end of the day, I cannot control every ounce of the perception of this. And that was hard for me and that was something I had to process in prayer. I never before...

And you could hear this the wrong way and be like, "This is the most dramatic dude on earth." But God meets us where we are. I never before reflected on the passages where Jesus is on trial and doesn't defend himself. And I just found myself thinking about what that was like for Jesus. To have the people that... And I want to be clear, this was not my broad experience when sharing the news, but to know or to hear or to feel that some people were thinking or even naming things that it's like, ugh. And that's who I don't want to be. And every ounce of me wants to defend myself, or vindicate myself, or something like that. And yet, I'm feeling this invitation from God to inhabit a different posture, one of surrender, one hopefully in the way of Jesus. So that was a big part for me.

I can speak for John Mark and just name one of the difficulties for him or maybe one of the pain points. I can't remember the terminology he used exactly. But John Mark had to live a part of this journey that I did not, which is to be around post-transition. I said bye on my last Sunday, and I've never seen that church led by someone who isn't me. I've never walked that part of the journey. John Mark said goodbye, disappeared briefly, and then returned and was just a congregant in the church for six months. His family recently relocated to a home for the next chapter of Practicing the Way, which was the plan all along.

But I would see him every Sunday, and often hang out with him during the week and just be one of those people who was processing how he was doing. But that was a thing for him, where he was observing things in the church that he had led for two decades that he would do differently, and he was observing things go really well in certain ways. And those were both inciting different internal emotions within him. But he also knew, "Neither of these are things that I should give into." And I think maybe the thing I respect about John Mark the most is that in the most honest and true and real way, he championed me in public and fought his private wrestles in private. In terms of the human factors of why this has gone so well, I would rank that number one. I think God is the primary reason, but that is number one. The person saying goodbye has more to do with how it goes after them than anything else.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I'm connecting with John Mark again shortly, and I'm definitely going to ask him about his take on that. But yeah, I can relate to that. I'm still part of the church that I handed over... Well, I didn't hand it over, but you know what I mean. I'm no longer lead pastor, but I attend there, and it is its own creature. So I think you answered this, but if there's anything else, feel free to add it. I was going to ask you, what did John Mark do well in those six months where he was the congregant and you were the leader? Obviously, you said championing you publicly, fighting his battles privately. Was there anything else he did? Because you're right, I think that is the rub. When you look at failed transitions, it's the founder who sticks around and then who starts whisper campaigns about, "Well, Tyler didn't do..." Or whatever, or just kind of withholds approval, that puts cracks in the foundation. Obviously John Mark didn't do it. What else did he do well that really made you feel, or the church feel blessed in those six months?

Tyler Staton:



He let himself be weak, and he followed Jesus as a disciple and not as a leader in front of the people that he had led. So I would see him Sunday after Sunday, coming up to receive prayer ministry, being broken before the Lord in front of all these people. And I just feel like he showed what it is to not just be a Christian leader, but to be a real Jesus follower in the way that he left. And I think, maybe, when it's all said and done, the way he lived in those six months will bear more fruit than the incredible teaching he gave for 17 years before those six months.

Because it was like a living sermon, Sunday after Sunday, because he showed up, took notes on the teaching, postured himself before God, raised his hands in worship, wept in confession, laid hands on his family and prayed for them, fell on his knees at the altar. He just followed Jesus in front of everyone, right alongside everyone that he had led. And that shows an incredible amount of emotional maturity, but just an incredible sincerity and what the journey of discipleship to Jesus really is.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'm so glad I asked the question. Thank you. That's very moving. Very, very moving. So you've been a leader for about a year. Biggest challenges, biggest joys in that first year, Tyler?

Tyler Staton:

The joys are much easier to start with because it's been a year of incredible favor. I have had so much fun pastoring this church. And I think the biggest thing would be this, that I really do believe that God was calling me here and that God selected me, a pawn on his board, and put me down here for this time, for these people. Because the things that he has done and planted most deeply within who I am as a disciple, as a leader, were the very things that this church was hungry for and ready for next. So in many ways, it feels like the things I carry most deeply, which I would define as prayer, presence and mission, like a radical commitment to prayer, a belief in responsible, healthy practice of the gifts and ministry of the spirit. And then being a people of mission, both in terms of the proclamation of the gospel, but the demonstration of the gospel as well in the way that we love and serve the least of these among us.

So those were the very places this church was longing to venture. And it was almost like I showed up and someone just needed to strike a match and drop it on this dry hay. And so I've just had so much fun getting to steward that. And there will be other seasons. It won't always be like this, but man, I'm going to dance around as long as it's like this. So-

Carey Nieuwhof:

You got to ride the highs because they don't always come, right?

Tyler Staton:

Absolutely. So that's been a lot of fun. Challenge, I think there's different challenges associated with just leading a larger church. The context feels pretty similar in that it's an incredibly unchurched context in New York, same in Portland. The specific part of Brooklyn that we were in was kind of like a hyper post-everything, very cynical mindset type of place. All that feels familiar. But I went from leading a staff of 10, was the largest things ever got in Brooklyn, to a staff of 30. And the church got much larger. That changes the way you relate to the congregation, it changes the way that you relate to the staff, it changes what your weekly routines look like.

And so I think I've had to try to become, and I'm still learning this very much, but more attentive to myself and trying to gauge what does it look like to inhabit this role in a healthy way for the long term,

based on the gifts God has put in me and the limitations that I possess, both as a father of young children, a person with a particular personality structure and all those different things. And I've gotten that wrong a lot here in the first year plus, and I'm getting it wrong right now in ways I don't know about yet. But I think each time I skin my knee, I realize like, okay, let me try to recalibrate here a little bit and try to learn from this. So that's been the biggest challenge, is just the different leadership dynamics presented by a larger community and a different context.

Carey Nieuwhof:

More specifically, what are some of those pressure points as they've shown up in caring for yourself or attending to yourself? What are the pressure points that you have now because it's bigger that weren't there at the Oaks?

Tyler Staton:

A lot more outside good ministry opportunities and discerning, how do I say yes? What do I say yes to? What is an amount that I can give that feels like overflow and blessing to the broader church? And what is an amount that feels like this is actually costing a wage I wouldn't pay either to my family or to my local church family? And then I think, also, learning how to love. I mean this in a sincere way. Ultimately, the call to be a pastor is a call to suffering love. So learning, how do I love people most of whom I don't know personally? And I can't actually know all of these people personally.

Now there's a certain train of thought that would say, you should never pastor a church where you don't know everyone personally. And I'm not a massive proponent of a particular model of church, but I would say that's a false dichotomy. I don't think that's entirely true.

Carey Nieuwhof:

With you on that.

Tyler Staton:

But I think this is the place God's called me and the people that he's called me to, so how do I become someone... Because the kingdom of God moves by love. So how do I become someone who has a heart of deep compassion for a community, when many of the faces in that community are familiar faces, but their names and stories that they're bringing behind that face remain unfamiliar to me? That's been a big challenge, and one that I've mainly taken to prayer. I've really identified with Psalm 16 where it talks about, "God being my portion, my cup." And it says, "Of the people of the land, these are the noble ones in whom is all my delight."

And I've simply asked God to help me to both know and understand the pain points of these people. What are the common pain points here? What are the idols of the land here? And then also to know and name what are the joys and delights of these people? And to enter into the thematic story of this community, through knowing some people, knowing some leaders and through a lot of prayer. And so that's one that I feel that I'm on a journey with but has been new and just a new thing to navigate.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Appreciate you sharing all that. We're going to get to your book in just a moment, which I absolutely love. But in the chapter on confession, you just keep it so real. You talk pretty transparently about carrying a pornography addiction, not just through your teen years, but into your marriage and the beginning of your ministry, yelling at the kids, disagreements with your wife while you're on your way to

a midnight prayer meeting. I mean, it's pretty transparent. And what's refreshing about that is all of us who lead in a Christian context have got similar stories. Maybe switch out the exact details, but yeah, there are times where we were arguing on the way to church and I had to preach. And there were times where it felt like it was falling apart on the inside. In one way or another, we've all been there.

How do you manage the tension of sin and failure and leadership or pastoral responsibility, if you want to phrase it that way?

Tyler Staton:

Yeah, I think there's a way to steward your own vulnerability that's responsible and a way to steward your vulnerability that's irresponsible. And I think that remembering who I am and who I'm not is very important in stewarding my own failure. I am not the savior. And setting up an understanding, even an unconscious understanding where I creep in on that space a little bit in the minds of people is not serving them. And so I think it's irresponsible if I come into the pulpit every Sunday and start with the worst things I did in the last week. That's an irresponsible stewarding of my vulnerability. But I think to give people the gift of being someone who is trying to follow Jesus, receive the love of the Father, live by the power of the Spirit, and is doing so in a flesh that is corrupted, and in fits and starts and learning through failure far more than learning through saintly practice. That's a gift to give people.

And I think I've discovered over time as well that what Henri Nouwen says about being a wounded healer really is true. And you can't be a wounded healer if you're still bleeding out, but what was an open wound that becomes something more like a scar, then I think you're ready to provide healing to others in a similar way that Jesus did when Thomas ran his hands over the scars on his wrists. And so I would just say, it's been my pastoral experience that God uses my failures or my incompetencies to bless and minister to others in far more deep ways than he uses my gifts and competencies. And as a leader, I think it is then my responsibility to steward well, my incompetencies on behalf of the people that I lead and not just my competencies.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's really well said. You mentioned pornography in the book, and I asked this question because it just hasn't come up for a long time on this podcast. But you read the stats, a lot of people struggle with it. And you say it's been years now since that's been an active issue in your life, maybe a decade or more. What were some of the keys to overcoming that addiction or affliction, or however you want to phrase it?

Tyler Staton:

Yeah, it's been more than a decade. And I think there were some real practical helps that I was given through wise people, that really served me. And I think I did all the obvious things. I had people that knew the depths of my brokenness and the specifics. I had accountability, and I don't just mean that in the what's worst thing you did this week sense, though I do mean that, but I also mean people that knew who I wanted to become and was growing into, and who believed in me growing into that person, and so were helping me along the way. I had mentors. I confessed regularly and specifically. All those things.

And then some mentors gave me some helpful tools I think for how to combat temptation. But ultimately, the thing that led to victory for me is wildly unsatisfying when I share it with people because it was simply this. I actually began to believe that God loved me in the midst of my utter and consistent and repeated failure. And somehow, that began to loosen the grip of temptation on me. And I cannot

explain it. All I can say is for a long time I would fail in this area and I would just feel dirty. And I would feel dirty or defeated, or both, for some period of time and then I'd kind of get back to feeling like myself, and then I'd fail again. And I began to fail and feel loved.

And somehow, when I began to experientially believe in the grace of God and the forgiveness of God, the grip of sin seemed less tight. And it still involved effort and putting into practice some things I was learning from mentors and everything, but it was suddenly like the effort became possible whenever I chose it, and it began to work. It could wriggle my way out of this thing that had me in a choke hold. So that's what, I would say, beautifully biblical and wildly-unsatisfying response to that struggle in my life.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, actually I find it very compelling. Very compelling and moving. So Tyler, the thing that struck me in reading through *Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools* is you're drinking from a really deep well. Do you mind if I ask you, how old are you right now?

Tyler Staton:

Yeah, I turned 35 two days ago.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Happy birthday, man.

Tyler Staton:

Thank you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Happy 35th. Well, you're right with the wisdom of somebody literally twice your age. I would expect a book like this, this is just my editorial comment, of somebody maybe in their 60s or 70s, but not somebody in their 30s. And it just shows everything from the people you quote, the experiences you've had, the way you've thought about these subjects, it's extremely compelling. And that always says to me, okay, there's got to be disciplines, habits, rhythms that have you reading widely, not just studying for Sunday or studying to write a book, but you're writing out of the overflow here, or at least that's how I see it.

Do you mind sharing some of the disciplines and rhythms in your own life and what they look like to produce work like this? I'm honestly really pretty blown away.

Tyler Staton:

Oh, thank you. Do you mean rhythms of prayer practices or of study?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, we can talk about prayer practices, we can talk about reading practices. I mean your quotes go beyond the usual people, saints that people quote. Your scripture knowledge is quite deep. And again, for someone at your stage, I normally would expect writing like that from somebody who's lived several decades more.

Tyler Staton:

I think I love to read, so I'm sure that helps. I'm always reading three types of books at once. I'm always reading something for study, for some future teaching thing I'm going to do, not immediately. I'm never studying for the teaching series that I'm in while I'm in it. That's always happened a distance out. And then, secondly, I'm always reading something for pastoral inspiration or just personal spiritual inspiration. Like I'm reading some book about Jesus that just makes me want to follow him more. And then, lastly, I'm always reading a novel or a memoir because I love reading fiction, and I love reading memoir, and I love being connected to a broader world than just the one that supports, I want to say my belief system, but that seems to minimize what I mean when I say the thing that holds everything together. But I think I want to be connected to people and reading memoir and reading fiction I think keeps my heart soft toward all kinds of people.

So I'm always reading those different types of books. And I think I see God in all those types of books in different ways. And then when it comes to the books that I'm reading or the people that I'm reading, I also just read broadly, theologically. I think I'm not at all threatened by chewing the meat and spitting out the bones, and I feel like people often are. So I'm reading mystics, and Catholics, and Evangelicals, and Eastern Orthodox monks, and everyone in between because Christian history is this rich tapestry. And I think so many of us, we come to something like prayer, and it's almost like we're painting on a canvas and only know one or two colors. And I'm going, there's this whole color wheel.

It's so much more fun if you discover the great creativity of expression and connection to God throughout Christian history. And it will challenge you and stretch you and move you in directions that are uncomfortable at first, that become comfortable in the end. And maybe even cause you to dabble with something and ultimately say, "No, no, I don't think that is a pathway." But I would just say I read broadly. And people whose writing I really connect with, I then see who they're quoting and start reading those people. So that's where a lot of my study is rooted, and it's unplanned. I don't have blocked-off periods of study time. I think I just love to learn. So I'm kind of always cranking away whenever I get a little time.

And then prayer, man, prayer is just the most sacred place in my life. So yeah, I have practices of contemplative and charismatic and intercessory prayer that are rhythmic and spontaneous for me. Meaning, I live by three times a day, morning, midday and evening daily prayer rhythm. And I close every sermon by inviting everyone to stand and opening up my hands and trying to listen to the Lord prophetically for the people that I get to lead. And I pray through lists of intercessions that I'm holding before God daily, and I pray spontaneously intercession.

And I find that when you hold rhythms of prayer, that spontaneity in prayer just comes out of you. So I notice that I'm kind of talking to God all the time or listening to God all the time in many spaces in my life that in a previous stage were occupied by noise of various kinds, or filling... Even things like, I love to read. So I feel like I've slowed way down on audio books because there's a lot more quiet in my life, but that quiet becomes filled with prayer. So that would be the short and simplest answer to what my prayer practice looks like.

But I think my great desire is to live every day in communion with the Father. That seems to be what Jesus is doing. And so I have a written prayer sitting right next to where I make coffee every morning. It's a page I tear out of my journal, and it's the first thing that I pray every day. There's a lot of psychological evidence that where you direct your attention first and last every day shapes you more than anything else. And so I direct my attention first with a certain prayer. And there's another prayer that I've written that sits on my bedside, and I read it in prayer every night, and that's where I end my day. And in that prayer, I set my focus each morning. It says, "My great desire today is to live by prayer, to withdraw often, to pray, to know your voice, Father, to walk beside you," all that. So that would be the great desire of my life.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I think for a lot of Christians, and particularly Christian leaders, prayer can feel like something you should do, not something you want to do. And you outlined this in the book, but I think there was a moment, maybe it wasn't when you were 13, but something happened when you were 13 in eighth grade that I think some cemented that for you. And if that wasn't it, please take us to the incident, the time, the story that kind of made prayer more of a joy than a burden for you. Because I think a lot of people experience it as an ought, not a want.

Tyler Staton:

Yeah, what you're referring to is when I was 13 years old, I met Jesus profoundly prayer walking around my public middle school every day over a summer vacation. And it awoke such passion and joy and love within me that I just kept doing it when the school year started again. And at the beginning of that summer, I wasn't even sure if I believed in Jesus. It was sort of an experiment. And I've had to return to experiences like that again and again. But my observation is that when people struggle to connect with God in prayer or prayer feels more like a duty, it's typically because they are praying in a way that they think they ought to pray. And so they've been handed a form of prayer. Most people when they hear prayer, they think about metal folding chairs in a circle, where everyone's seated and bowing their heads.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And you got to listen to someone talk and pray incessantly. Yeah.

Tyler Staton:

Sure. And that is prayer. But for me, the way that I first learned to pray was by walking and praying. And I am very kinetic in my thinking. I accidentally write most of my teachings on early morning runs. And so there's something about moving my body that doesn't just free my mind, but it allows me, I think, to declutter my mind, and therefore the things to come up in me that really matter, that I'm really wrestling over, that I'm really hoping for. But the deeper things within me, underneath the clutter of today's circumstances come to the surface easily when I'm moving. And so that's the way that I've always prayed. And then secondly, I think a lot of people have a prayer devoid of wonder. And wonder is so essential when it comes to prayer.

I think I have had many seasons where wonder has been an intentional discipline and practice for me. And it's mainly been, for me, where that has been situated is I have had as a pastoral practice in many different seasons, one night a week, it was often a Monday night, just like an ordinary weekday night, where the last hour of the evening, like 9:00 to 10:00 PM, last thing I do before I go to sleep or something, I spend walking around the place that I live, and trying to see people and my surroundings through the eyes of God, and not through my own eyes. And I just come alive and wonder again as I do that. I just think, "Oh, my word. It is absolutely ludicrous or completely breathtaking that I believe that there is a God who hung all the stars that I can see off in a distance in the sky, who are so far from me that there's like a pretty significant gap between the light shining off of them and me even perceiving the light."

"And I also believe that he is so deeply interested in the details of my life that he has given everything to be with me, that he is always attentive to me and it's simply a matter of me tuning my attention to him, that he uniquely knitted each one of these people together all around me, that he delighted to see all these different types of trees come to be and the creatures that are in them." And I just think wonder

comes alive in me again. I pass restaurants and I think, "God planted ingredients in the ground that somehow someone in Thailand figured out a way to combine to make curry, and now I get to taste curry." Anyway, I just think so many people live a spiritual life that's devoid of wonder. And if wonder leaks out of your spiritual life, I would just say like you're on a pretty slippery slope to making something that is meant to be joy into something utilitarian. So that might sound childish and ridiculous, but that's an important part of my prayer life, personally.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So you are in the thick of it. Mid-30s, you've got three children under the age of seven, you're married and you're leading a big church with a lot of responsibility. A lot of people would hear that and say, "Yeah, I don't have time for prayer walks. I don't have time to read three books at once." But you found that, can you break down a little more where either those intentional rhythms are or where the cracks are where you make the time to do that? Because as I often say to young leaders, "Man, if this is you at 35, I can't wait to see you at 50 or 60 or 70 because these things compound over time in a really cool way." So I just love the habits and the disciplines and the rhythms that you're embracing. Can you say a little bit more about how it actually happens when you have kids and life and leadership?

Tyler Staton:

Yeah, absolutely. I'm very much in the thick of it. I think it happens in a couple of different ways. Number one, I get up really early in the morning. I get up at 5:00, and I go to bed really early at night. And I have things that I don't do, so that I can do these things that I love. I don't watch television during the week at all. I watch television on the weekends because I really like Kentucky college basketball, so if one of their games is on, I'll watch it. Or I watch a movie on a Friday evening with my wife sometimes, things like that. But I just think there's certain things that you have to give away so that you can say yes to the things that you want to say yes to, that gratify your deep desires.

Jesus talks a lot about the bread that satisfies. And I think the more that I have been able to tune my taste buds to the bread that satisfies my soul, the more that's the bread that I crave. And I can distinguish between distraction and indulgence, and spiritual bread of life. And distraction and indulgence aren't bad, they just should be enjoyed in moderation. And you should feast on the bread of life every day and in every way. So I think I've had to say no to some things. I get up early in the morning and my practices are probably less rigorous than they sound. I'm reading memoir fiction all the time because it's what I do when I lay down at night. So I read a novel about two or three pages at a time. Because I'm one of those people that falls asleep nearly immediately when they lay down.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Me too. Takes forever get through a book. Yeah.

Tyler Staton:

Exactly. So I'm reading this great memoir right now, and it's going to take me three months, and that's fine. I'm not trying to crank through it. I'm trying to get lost in a story. And so there's those things. And then I repurposed times that I used to use for something else. So I ride my bike to and from work every day, and I pray my morning prayers on my bike ride into work, and I pray my evening prayers on my bike ride home from work. And so my bike ride is this sacred space of encounter between me and God. So it isn't an additional thing I've put into my schedule. I was going to have to do that anyway. It's just the using of that rhythm in a certain way.

And then lastly, and I'm suspicious that at least people with my personality type, this is really why... There's certain people that think they don't have time because they are maybe filling their life with non-essentials. But there's other people that think they don't have time because I think there are things they're unwilling to minimize. So I actually believe... This is what I mean by that. So part of my work is creative. I write sermons, and that's a creative process. And creative work is unpredictable. You can't clock in and clock out. Sometimes I'm able to write a sermon in a brief window of time and I feel great about it, and other times it's a wrestle.

But I have disciplined windows for sermon writing that I hold my sermon writing within, and then I go with what I've got. And I think I would say secretly, a lot of people think they don't have time because they would never go with what they've got. They think, "Oh, the sermon's got to be polished, but I can pray when I have time." And I would say that is the hidden atheism that lives beneath the American church. It is my belief that the soul that I'm bringing before people is what must be prepared. And the words on the paper... I think I've had enough experiences in ministry feeling like, "Gosh, I didn't know if I had anything. And it seems like the Lord just worked in people today. He was so kind." And that's preaching or whatever.

And there's other times when I'm like, "Honestly, I think I'm about to go on in here and light some dynamite and blow the roof off this place." And then I'm like, "Eh, very little seemed to occur. Lord, I hope you planted seeds that grow slowly over a long time." And so I just think, I don't trust myself, but I trust Jesus. And so if I'm not attuned to him, what on Earth am I helping people with and what am I bringing to people? So I would say prayer is the essential rhythm that I need for everything else to exist. And everything else has to come second or else I'm not sure I'm believing the story I'm telling.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a really interesting paradigm shift, and I have never quite thought of it that way. And you know that famous Martin Luther quote, "I'm so busy today, I can't imagine not praying for three hours to be in the day." That's a bad paraphrase of it. I've never understood that, but it completely makes sense after what you just shared. Is that sort of the thought, I've got so much to do, I better get my heart right first?

Tyler Staton:

Yeah, I think so. This is how I think about it. There's Mary and Martha that are often talked about. And by personality, I'm more Martha. I'm a busybody. Just to lay it all on the table, I'm an Enneagram three. I love accomplishing things. I love being perceived well, all that stuff. And so what I want to do is in every environment I'm in, I want to make it the greatest thing that has ever happened. And I don't just mean my leadership. I mean, I want this Saturday morning with my kids to be the greatest Saturday morning any of us have ever experienced. I have such a insatiable thirst for life. And so I think, "What does it look like for me to follow Jesus as his disciple?" And this is what I think it looks like. It looks like to serve every meal with a course or two missing, and to trust that it'll be enough for Jesus to work with. So I think about that.

I think about Martha running around and I think there are things I have to do. There are courses to prepare, but to stay with the image of preaching, if what I bring to the church this Sunday, I really wanted to be a five-course dinner, and I've only prepared three courses because I sat at the feet of Jesus when it was time to sit at his feet. Then I think what I'm asking is, "Jesus, will you take both? What I've been able to prepare, my competency? And will you take what I've left undone, my incompetency? And will you create a feast for your people through it? Because only you can feed them."



It's a loaves and fishes offering. When I wanted to bring catering, but I want to be someone that brings loves and fishes over the course of my life and gives God a chance to be exactly who he says he is. And so that is hard. It's not just like, "Oh, this is..." I'm kind of a freewheeling sort of guy. It is counter formation for me, but it is necessary counter formation for me. Otherwise, I'll run around the kitchen my whole life and rarely sit at his feet.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. Tyler, this has been convicting, inspiring, beautiful. Thank you. Thank you. I mean that. The book is called Praying Like Monks, Living Like Fools. Tyler Staton. Man, I got to a fraction my questions, so we'll have to have you back in the future. This has been so good.

Tyler Staton:

Sorry. Long-winded answerer on the other side.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. The good ones, you don't exhaust your questions, I promise you. Any final thoughts you want to share with people or just tell us where they can find you online these days?

Tyler Staton:

Yeah, I mean, I'm on Instagram @TylerCStaton. If you go to tylerstaton.com, it's S-T-A-T-O-N. All the stuff that you might want to know is on there. But I would love to pray over anyone who's listened. Can we end that way?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, let's do that. By all means.

Tyler Staton:

Okay. Yeah. Spirit of the living God, I pray that if, through the course of this conversation, someone who's listening to it, permissively eavesdropping on mine and Carey's conversation, if there's been a deep hunger or desire awoken within them, I pray, Lord, that they would bring it to you. And I pray that miraculously, quickly, slowly, painfully, however you want to, but I pray you would satisfy that desire. And ultimately, God, I pray that anyone who's trying to follow after you as their rabbi, Jesus, as I am, I pray that you would never let them get too comfortable because you're always inviting them on greater adventure, and greater formation into your image. So God, let everything that has been said that was fluff for the individual, just fall away. And let there be a thing or two that's buoyant, that remains at the top, that they take from listening to this into a conversation with you, that will ultimately produce grapefruit in their lives. That's what I long for for anyone that you're speaking to through it. In Jesus' name, amen.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Amen. Tyler, thank you so much.

Tyler Staton:

Yeah, thank you for inviting me on. So wonderful to be with you. You're such a kindred spirit, I can see that immediately. So thank you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

You should feel my heart, strangely warmed. It's beautiful. Thank you so much, Tyler.

Tyler Staton:

Yeah, much love to you.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, that kind of was like church, wasn't it? Really profound and really meaningful. And I'm so grateful that we have next-gen leaders who take prayer seriously. People like me continue to want to grow in it. And we want to thank our partner episodes as well. Pro MediaFire, you can get your communications and creative work done for less than the cost of a staff hire by booking a free consultation today. Go to [promediafire.com/carey](https://promediafire.com/carey).

Convoy of Hope is all over the world. If you want to partner with them and make a real difference, go to [convoyofhope.org/donate](https://convoyofhope.org/donate). And of course, we got show notes as well. You can go to [careynieuwhof.com/episode537](https://careynieuwhof.com/episode537). We also have transcripts. If you want any of the references that we talk about, it's all there in the show notes for you, and of course we offered that to you for free.

Well, coming up on the podcast, we have Tim Keller coming back. Katelyn Beaty, I loved her book on Celebrities for Jesus. Erwin McManus, Annie F. Downs, Chris Anderson from TED, kicking off the New Year with James Clear and Atomic Habits, also Sean Cannell, and next episode, Rory Vaden. He's a New York Times bestselling author and TED speaker. And well, here's an excerpt.

Rory Vaden:

There's one shortcut that we've discovered. And so when we train our internal team, this is what we teach them because we have to teach them on how to read this for people. And I'll tell you what it is, okay? And we didn't know this, Carey, when we started the company four years ago, but now we've... I don't don't know. We've probably had about 1,200, I should look it up, but probably about 1,200 clients that we've taken through this process. We know this now. Here's what we know. You are most powerfully positioned to serve the person you once were. You're most powerfully positioned to serve the person you once were. This is the ultimate hint and throughline that we're looking for.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Now, if you subscribe, you get that automatically for free every single time we release an episode, and we do that about six times a month around here. Thanks for sticking around to the end. I got something really cool for you, it's free. If you like this episode, please do leave us a rating and review. But here's the freebie. Churches that aren't just surviving but thriving in this season actually have eight common traits. So if you want to weed out unhealthy areas of your ministry and lead a thriving church, I've got something for you called the Thriving Church Checklist. It also comes with an ebook. You can get that totally for free by going to [thrivingchurchchecklist.com](https://thrivingchurchchecklist.com). That's [thrivingchurchchecklist.com](https://thrivingchurchchecklist.com).

Thanks so much for listening, everybody. I really hope our time together today has helped you thrive in life and leadership. And we'll catch you next episode.