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Announcer: The art of leadership Network.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Welcome to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, it's Carey here and I hope our time together today helps you thrive in life and leadership. Man, I'm excited because well, we're going right into the field today. I know a lot of you either work at churches or support churches. And so, we're talking about all things church planting today with JJ Vasquez and Warren Bird. I think you're gonna love this episode is brought to you by our partners at Compassion. Compassion actually partners with 8,400 local churches in the developing world to break the cycle of poverty. Go to compassion.com/carey to explore the resources and partnership compassion has for your church and by the Preaching Cheat Sheet. If you are a communicator of any kind, including preachers, go get my free preaching, cheat sheet at preachingcheatsheet.com. I'd love to help you. It's absolutely free.

Well, Warren Bird reached out.

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He's always doing some fascinating research. He is currently the Senior Vice President for research at ECFA. The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability. He is the author or co-author of 34 books, including two that I wrote the forward to. How to Break Church Growth Barriers by Carl George and Warren Bird, and Liquid Church: Six Powerful Currents to Saturate Your Church and Your City for Christ by Tim Lucas and Warren Bird. So I'm very excited to have Warren back, and he has forgotten more data than most of us will ever know in our lifetime. So he's doing some research on church planting and brings the details about how all that has changed, and Warren and I thought it would be fun to do this interview with an actual Church Planter who's had some great experience. So in 2014 Pastor JJ and Liz Vasquez planted a church called Journey Church in the heart of Winter Park, Florida and they decided to serve their community and the city of Orlando selflessly.

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Since then, they have seen things really go well.

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And they've had their ups and downs, and they made it through Covid. And he is also the author of a book called Hello God. So I think you're gonna really enjoy this conversation. And hey, if you want more in the trenches episodes from practitioners,

let me know, just send me a note at carey@careynieuwhof.com and we'll see what we can do.

So I'd like to highlight a ministry that is all about the local church. And that's Compassion International. Their mission is to release children from poverty in Jesus' name, but they fulfill it by partnering with local churches in the areas of extreme poverty. And here's what they do: They solve the problem of every local church leader who is like, how do we do international missions? Well, by doing it for you. Every one of the sponsored children, 2.2 million, are cared for by a local church. So this could be like your church partnering with local churches. They have 8,400 churches in the developing world that they're on the ground with. So if you're a church leader, Compassion provides valuable resources, not only internationally, but for your church too.

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For example, when I was pastor of Connexus Church, Compassion offered our church an amazing opportunity for outreach, which is why I loved working with them. It allowed, everyone in our church to be personally engaged in mission, and they made it easy for me as a Lead Pastor. So if you want to explore, how you can go Church to church, your church to churches around the world, visit compassion.com/carey to explore resources Compassion has available for your church. Make sure you check it out. And listen, I know if you're a communicator, how difficult it can be to do a good job and to keep your sermons fresh, to make your talks pop, and whether you're hitting writer's block, or you're in a rush, trying to put the finishing touches on a talk, things don't always go as planned and that's why I developed my 10-step Preaching Cheat Sheet.

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After decades of communicating. It hit me the other day, I have been communicating publicly for 40 years, that's crazy. I know because I'm 38, but that's true. I started when I was 16 years old. And so, for over 40 years, I've been communicating publicly, and I've learned how not to do it and how to do it. And so I put together 10 simple prompts with examples that you can start using as early as today. It's absolutely free, I'd love to help you out with that, go to preachingcheatsheet.com Obviously that works for preachers. But if you're just a communicator, you're a CEO or a leader, who has to give a talk once in a while, even in front of a team, this will help. Go download your copy of the Preaching Cheat Sheet absolutely free.

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Well, now a really great and I hope invigorating conversation with Warren Bird and JJ Vasquez.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Warren and JJ, welcome to the podcast.

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Warren Bird: Great to be here. Thank you.

JJ Vasquez: Yeah. Thank you so much for having us.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Oh. You're so welcome. So Warren, I want to start with your research because you're always doing so much research. Church planting is changing.

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What are the big differences between twenty years ago, planting a church, and today?

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Warren Bird: Yeah. Great question. ECFA, the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, did the largest ever study of North American church planting. So Carey, eh, 8% were Canada. And so the lay of the land is really different than twenty years ago. There are church planters, church planters are older. The average age right now at launch is 42. That's climbed by six years over the last fifteen years. And there are huge implications for that. There's more team-based leadership. They're more women planters and partner planters with husbands. There's more multiracial church plants. Disproportionately so. They're more likely to partner with a local church rather than to be like parachuted in by denomination. There's more openness to going quickly to multiple services and to multi-site. There are more thoughts about multiplication first church I planted, survival by next Sunday was my goal. But today's planters are very different. So Carey, we could unpack any of those, but that's a quick summary of different.

Carey Nieuwhof: So basically nothing's changed is what you're saying, weren't right?

Warren Bird: Well and then we could even talk about the pandemic and that that short three-year window, what changed during that.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, let's go there and then we can start to unpack it. So what changed in the last three years,

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Warren Bird: A lot more transfer growth during the pandemic.

Carey Nieuwhof: Okay can I stop you there? Do you have stats for that? Or is that a guess?

Warren Bird: Yes, we asked everybody in the survey to take their current congregation and size it up by five categories. And I'll start at the bottom kind of biological growth; kids, how much is transfer growth locally, and transfer growth from out of the area, how much is conversion growth, which would mean receiving Christ as your savior for the first time, and how much is renewal growth? Which would be like, de-churched people coming back to church and starting over, and we've got percentages. I've got all kinds of free reports, free downloads a ecfa.org/surveys, but the bottom line, the transfer growth for during the pandemic was almost double what it was for churches prior to the pandemic and, not to pick on church plants, I think there was a big reshuffling all over the map of all kinds of churches during the pandemic, including the majority of people who were part of more than in one church during the pandemic, in terms of viewing services.

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Carey Nieuwhof: So do you know, and maybe the data doesn't go there, but you mentioned two kinds of transfer growth, because I think most people would say, yeah, you know, the whole nation shuffled like everybody moved towns, and cities, and houses, and neighbourhoods, and we had the housing bubble and the whole deal. How much of that transfer growth was relocation vs just people packing up from their old church and going across the street to the new one?

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Warren Bird: So for new churches, during the pandemic, 42% of the congregation was described as transfer growth locally, whereas churches prior to the pandemic, the local transfer growth was 26%. So 42% verses 20% for local transfer growth.

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Outside transfer growth was identical. 21% for both.

Carey Nieuwhof: Interesting. So you're saying 63-ish% of all the growth of growing churches in the last few years was transfer growth?

Warren Bird: New churches during the pandemic.

Carey Nieuwhof: Okay, well interesting. Now we've had conversations before and JJ, feel free to jump in on some of this, where you said the way to get people to go to church is to plant new churches, but that sounds like that's also true for transfer growth.

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Warren Bird: Yes, but, if I have 5 to 10% of people coming to Christ each year, I've got to have all kinds of Believers to support that. You know, example, the people we invited to Easter, if they came, and come to Christ, it's going to be like 3 years before they're giving. So there's got to be some kind of core that's doing the volunteering and underwriting finances until that point. So incidentally, growing churches, by the way, have a lower per capita giving than non-growing churches because the growing churches have that kind of free rider, you know, the first time guest who are checking it out, kicking the tires, and aren't anywhere near a spiritual commitment, and that's good, I think.

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Carey Nieuwhof: JJ, does any of this surprise you? We're gonna continue with trends. I have a feeling we'd spent an hour on trends, but JJ, weigh in. So give us a little bio of how you and your wife got started in ministry and what you do, and then we'd love your color commentary along the way.

JJ Vasquez: Yeah. So, I've been in church kind of my whole life. My first job was selling shoes, and then after that, it was ministry. And so from 17 on, the church has been my life, graduated from Southeastern University, have a Masters of Divinity. I've done youth ministry, for a long time. And then when I was about 28-29 years old, when I found, I felt the call to launch a church.

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We were youth pastoring at a church about 35 minutes, 40 minutes, South Orlando, which is where we are, in Florida, and I felt the call and it was something I never wanted to do, ever. I mean, I literally remember one of my first phone calls with my wife when we were dating and we were talking about, just kind of the life that we envisioned, and wanted to make sure that we were both on the same kind of trajectory before we took things emotionally too the next level, and she was like, hey I'm down for whatever God has for our family, if that's what God wants for us. You know, to get married. I was like cool, me too. I was like, is there anything you wouldn't do though? Like, missionary in Africa? She was like no I'd be down for that

but there's one thing I wouldn't do, and I was like what's that? She's like, start a church. I'd never want to ever start a church.

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And then I remember telling her, I was like cool, cool, cool, me too.

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Me neither, I would never ever want to do that, that's just the worst, that's so hard. Why would we want to do that? And so it really had to be the Lord, you know, I really think you have to be super duper confident in the calling that God has on your life and of course, by super duper confident, I mean like 70%, right?

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Because that's as high as you're allowed to go percentage-wise and still call it faith. You know? But for me it was it was the Lord just speaking to me after doing years of youth ministry.

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I was in a hotel room in North Carolina at a conference and just felt the Lord speak to me. And so, I always tell people the way that God speaks when it comes to church planting, it's usually through two sensitivities. It's one, being sensitive to the Spirit, being sensitive to his leading. And knowing that there's going to come a time when he's gonna ask you to do things that are maybe outside of your comfort zone. And the second comes through a story that my wife had she was at a gas station, because after he spoke to me, I was like, okay, I want to do it. I'm ready to plant.

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Lord, I hear you clearly. I'm pretty sure this is what you want me to do. I remember telling him, but you're gonna have to speak to my wife.

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Because my wife, she is ride or die. She's got my back and I didn't want to be the one to tell her, hey babe, I think God's called us to launch a church because if it failed, then it'd be my fault. So I was like, no Lord, it's got to be you. So that if it fails, we could both look at you and be like, hey, we were just being obedient to what you called us to. As so sure enough, a couple months later, she was at a gas station, and this couple came up, pulled up in a car. And this guy came out and asked for some money to help with her car with his car. Filled the gas tank, and and she did it. And

while she was doing that, she pretty much share the gospel with him, and asked him how he was doing because when she looked in the backseat of his car, it was his girlfriend. There was some pillows, a blanket, and a baby, and come to find out that he had just gotten released from from prison, and they were living in the backseat of their car, looking for work.

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And so, she just kind of shared about the church we were youth pastoring at the time and he came in on Sunday and I happened to be preaching that Sunday, which is a big deal for the youth pastor, preaching at a church. Like, I don't remember exactly what day it was, but it was probably like, time change Sunday or, you know, one of those Labor Day Memorial Day weekends, where they give the youth pastor some reps, and so I got to preach, and when I made the call for salvation, his name was John, his wife's name was Rita. It's been eight years since I've seen him, but I can still remember their faces, remember their names. They came up, gave their lives to Jesus, my wife and I set back in the front row when the service was done. And I looked at her and she was really emotional, she looked at me and she said, could you imagine building a church where, and these are the words that she said that became the mission statement of our church, where Jesus could be accessible to anyone. John had no background in religion, had no background in Christianity. He was literally out of prison in his car at the altar. And we thought, wouldn't it be cool to start a church like that, for that kind of a person. Central Florida, we're a part of the Bible Belt-ish. We got a lot of churches, and so we knew that if we were going to launch the church it had to be specific, there had to be a call on our life for a specific target audience and so our mission statement is "to make Jesus accessible to anyone" and that's who we exist for.

Carey Nieuwhof: When did you start Journey Church?

JJ Vasquez: We started Journey Church in 2016, September 2016.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Cool. Okay. So that's an awesome story. And I guess your wife was on board at that point.

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What about what Warren has shared so far resonates with you?

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And is there anything that seems a little bit like, not so sure?

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JJ Vasquez: No. I think the transfer growth is real. And I think there's a lot of layers to that. You know, in our city alone, we had a couple of big-name pastors through the pandemic who suffered moral failures. There were churches that couldn't make it financially. I mean, there's a lot of factors that played in to that, and people would come up. I think as a pastor, you have to be careful when people come, especially when people come with church hurt.

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Cause if they come to your church talking about their last church, it's probably going to be just a matter of time before they leave your church talking to you about their next church. And so we try not to build our church on transfer growth, but to Warren's point, you need someone to help you, resources-wise, in the meantime, while you reach these unchurched people who are really being educated on giving, on serving, on baptism.

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I mean I love our church. Our church is probably, and I wish I had the exact numbers and I'm going to try not to do the preacher rounding-up thing that we do as preachers, but I've got someone from our staff recording this so they can call me out if I'm wrong, but I would say probably 50% of our church has given their life to Christ in the last three years. Like the first time, or the first time since they were seven or eight years old, that's great. We love them, they're passionate, they're just messy, they're just messy. And they don't really know church, which is great because they come with a blank slate. But the other part of that is, you know, they don't know what it's like to serve or what it's like to give. And so we're grateful for the people that God sends, and I think as a pastor in this season, you just got to learn how to love with an open hand, kind of just release people when they're ready to move on and go, and thank them for the time that they were there. I think more than ever now, we have to be careful because of the things. I think Warren said that people went to two or three churches during the pandemic at one time, because, you know, everybody's church was who you listen to. So I think we have to beware church becoming a commodity

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One of many things. I buy Heinz brand or whether I buy this brand. You know, it's just that, so that can happen. And so you've got to kind of just figure out what makes

your community unique. And, yeah. I love people as they come and as they go and just know who God's called you to reach.

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Carey Nieuwhof: So how, Warren, do you determine like if someone's listing going, I don't know what percentage of my church is transferred growth. I had a methodology that I used for years that I think we still use at Connexus. And I think it's reasonably accurate. But what are the filters or criteria that help you determine whether you're actually getting new growth or transfer? New Growth being previously unchurched.

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Warren Bird: Yeah, good question. In this study, we asked the pastor and said, you've got five categories, you size it up. The good news is, if they lie, they all lie equally. But I have done other studies of people in the pews, so to speak, saying, did you come to faith in Jesus Christ through the ministry of this church? And churches that are new churches, and disproportionately large churches, megachurches, really rate high in the people in the pews saying like JJ's example.

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Yes, my spiritual life either started or started all over again, right here. And that creates a fierce discipleship potential, loyalty potential. You know, go the journey teach me how to do this potential, and it can be a very exciting road even as, and I love your word JJ, it's messy.

Carey Nieuwhof: Do you have particular criteria that you use, JJ?

JJ Vasquez: No, most of it's been anecdotal, you know, I try to sit in the lobby and meet people and talk to people and one of the first questions I ask is, how did you hear about us, and typically that will kind of open the floodgates of, oh I used to go to this church, or my friend invited me, or I was an atheist, and so yeah. So I would think it's mostly anecdotal but I love that you had a process. You got to shoot me over your process over at Connexus.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, I've got to ask the master here, Warren Bird, and try to figure out whether this is good or not. Warren, what we did, and when we do the "new here" card, and people give us their name, and address, and phone number, email, all that stuff, we ask one question with four categories. The question is, prior to attending Connexus, I attended church, and then we have four categories I think. So, every week, once a month, a couple times a year, or never. And if it was couple

times a year or never, we counted that unchurched, because people always exaggerate. It's like when was the last time you went for physical? Like, oh, probably like six months ago. No, it was six years ago actually that you went. And I think I can put David Kinnaman on record saying people tend to exaggerate their church attendance when they're asked to respond to a poll.

Warren Bird: It's called, by the way Carey, the halo effect.

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Carey Nieuwhof: There you go. So about usually between 50 and 60% of our people ticked those last two boxes, you know, once or twice a year or never, and we said, okay that's good. And then the rest were transferred growth, but we always wanted to find the majority. One of the theories I have, and I'd love to test this out with both of you, but Warren, I'll start with you. Is that this transfer growth is what economists might call market consolidation. So there used to be a lot of independent bookstores, the Barnes and Noble and Borders came along, and then Amazon came along. Now, there's not as many independent bookstores, it's not like the whole world started to read because these giant stores arrived. It's just like, no, what used to be served by ten bookshops is now served by one. And so in the same way that as America is becoming more post-Christian, you now have fewer churches, but the churches that remain tend to be a little bit larger and have momentum, unless they're hanging on by life support.

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Any thoughts on that? Do you think it's a form of market consolidation? Or do you have another theory or take on that?

Warren Bird: A good Canadian named Reginald Bibby, wrote a scholarly article called "The Circulating of the Saints," And it was just, how much is there churn and how much are you bringing new people in? And the key is by percentages and the churn is going to be inevitable.

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You can all stand up and say look if you're from another church, if you're from that church down the street that split, you know, go back there and be healed and help be part of that healing.

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But you can't keep transfer people away.

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Even if you posture yourself. The key is, and JJ, I bet you do this all the time. If you go through the last year of people's stories you told from the pulpit, what you brag on you get more of. And if you're continually talking about the person who comes to faith, the first time to church in years and years in years, that messages the people in the congregation who are in that boat to say, oh, yeah, there must be lots of us here. This is an okay place for me. This is safe. I can do my journey as well. So JJ, how often do you highlight a transfer person if one of your stories?

JJ Vasquez: I never do. And it's not because we're ashamed of it. Listen, the great thing and the worst thing. Well, not the great thing. An awesome thing and a difficult thing about the people who come to your church is, you can't control who comes to your church.

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And that's gonna be a challenge sometimes, as awesome as that can be too. But, no, we never highlight, but we always are highlighting the stories of the person who was far from God, who didn't go to church, who just got released from prison, who was an atheist, whose life almost was lost in a car accident. I mean, we highlight those and we really try and build the church around those people. And so, our from our assimilation process to our marketing, to the language that we use, when I say our mission statement is to make Jesus accessible to anyone. When we talk about the "anyone's," we defined "anyone's" as the religiously unaffiliated that would be how we see "anyone's." And so that's who our churches built for. And I think when you know who your audience is, that shapes a lot. I'll say this, I would say if we're not careful, we'll start a church built to reach lost people, then we'll be influenced by the transfer growth and then we'll lose the mission, because some of the people who don't like the things that were happening at their last church will try and convince you, you know, they bring finances, they bring people, and they'll try to convince you that this isn't the way we ought to do church, and you've just got to stick to the thing that God called you to do. Never stop. Never stop reaching lost people. Warren said it, that one of the best events evangelistic tools is church planting. I just think because when there's no one coming to your church, the only thing you can do is reach lost people. The transfer people are not picking you because you've got great lights, or because you've got great worship. Like, you don't have those things right now. You really have to go into the Starbucks', the YMCA's. You've got to go into the highways and byways and try and reach people, and you just never can lose that.

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So I am all for, you can't be a church plant forever, but you should never lose your church plant heart. Because the people who are coming from other churches, like I said, they're coming with either hurt or agendas. And so you can't lose that heart.

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Carey Nieuwhof: What is the upside and the downside of transfer growth, JJ? And then Warren, you've hinted at it a little bit, but let's start with JJ. And then, I want to get back to the rest of the stats. I mean, we're almost 25 minutes in. But, what is what is the upside and the downside of transfer growth?

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JJ Vasquez: So I'll say it quickly. And I think the upside is that they bring experience and they know church, right? So when you have an event or when you have some type of serving requirement, or some sort of outreach, they know church. They know what it is to tithe.

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That's great. The downside is, they're not just coming with their resources, they're also coming with their vision of what church should be, or their hurt. And so you just have to stay to, again, the vision God's called you, and try and love people where they are and lead with an open hand. So that would scrape one of the downsides.

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Warren Bird: JJ said it well, I just want to add the down the road. JJ, you are gifted evangelist. That's your heart and it sounds like, from you talking about your wife, that's her heart as well. There will come a certain time in the life of the church when there are enough people who have come to Christ, got grounded in their faith, and they're going to start making noise and saying, hey, what about us? You know, you're always focused on that person who isn't yet here, and the next person, but what about us? And, we're now of the majority of the church, and you have to decide, how much focus do I put on helping them get deeper roots, that's absolutely essential, at the expense of always keeping the church focused outward because gravity, in every church, no matter how old it is, is an inward tug to an internal focus which ends up with no new lives in Christ.

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Carey Nieuwhof: True.

JJ Vasquez: That's so good.

Carey Nieuwhof: Okay, other trends? Anything else you're seeing that is notable that you would like to reference off the top?

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Warren Bird: I'd like to talk about the role of vision. Interestingly, we asked, again we had 2,700 people in this ECFA church plant study. So we could slice and dice all kinds of ways. We said, look at your vision in the next five years.

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Do you believe you will multiply? How many times? And it was one of the few open-ended questions. And I took the two extremes. I took those who said zero, wrote in zero, and I took those who put five or more. Again, this is in the next five years. That's huge, just to say five. Those were the two extremes and I compared them. And you can guess, now you you're immediately going to say when you hear this comparison, well, is it chicken and egg or egg and chicken? But which one was growing? Which one was reporting higher conversion growth? Which one had more momentum in every different way? Which one had a higher launch attendance? And it was the one with the big vision. And I was amazed, we asked another question of, to what extent, I'm gonna read it because it was very purposely heavy. To what extent is the desire to create a network of multiplying churches, quote, "very much" part of your vision?

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Now, you would think long ago that would disqualify most churches. Hey, the Swedish Lutheran's moved here and where is the church for the Swedish Lutheran's? And if someone wants to become a Swedish Lutheran, you know, we'll happily accept them in, but we're the focus for there. And I'm not picking on Lutheran's or Swedes. Every single group has done this, but in answer to the question, was it very much part of your vision to create a network of multiplying churches when you started? New churches said 36%.

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Today, new churches said higher, 43%, so they've grown, but wait there's more. We asked that same question at multi-site churches. Was it part of your vision when you first started, 31%, to create this small network of multiplying churches. What about your vision today? 52%. So, all that to say this idea of multiplication of reproducing ourselves has taken root. I think it's one of the biggest shifts we've seen in church planting, thanks to Exponential, and many other groups, to say, hey, the goal of the gospel is 1 Timothy 2:2, the things you heard me say in the presence of many

witnesses, commit to reliable people who'll be qualified to teach others also. That's four generations of handoffs.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Wow. Yeah, you know, and that is Dave Ferguson and Todd Wilson have done a lot of work, they've been on this show talking about multiplication and it's wonderful to see that as a mindset. So on the one hand, if you want to paint a picture of the church, think you could say in North America, you've got a majority of churches that are plateaued or declining, and getting smaller every year. But those that are growing are really growing and have that idea of reproducing and multiplying and becoming multisite but also planting at the same time. JD Greear was on the podcast and he talked about being a multiplying church, and just an insane vision that they have to plant. Oh, I forget the number offhand. It was 500 or so churches. And they're way ahead of target, like way ahead of target. And it's that whole, which gives you hope for the future I guess, in the end, doesn't it?

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Warren Bird: Well it tells you there's going to be a parting of the way, because a different study that's done every five years, in the year 2000 found that the average size of a u.s. church was 160. In the year '05 it was less, in the year 2010 it was less, year 2015 it was less, in the year 2020, the survey was done just before the pandemic and the average U.S. congregation size was 60 people.

Carey Nieuwhof: I read that and I almost couldn't believe it.

Warren Bird: That's not sustainable financially, full-time Pastor-wise, maintaining a building, I mean, it's just huge implications and that's why mergers and new churches and everything else are balancing that out, all the while many denominations and others are saying here, let us help you figure out, how do you do revitalization and turn around?

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Carey Nieuwhof: What is happening? Because you've said this for years, and people don't like it and people on the internet beat up on these stats. But, you know, that the mega church is here to stay, multi-site churches are here to stay. And there's almost like a counter-movement to like, well, no, it's micro churches and it's this, and it's that, Warren, what's your take on that in 2023?

Warren Bird: Yes, there is an excitement about planting at every level. Some person says I'm a gamer, I want to reach people in the Roblox Community, you know. And I'm going to do it that way, and it can be a small group, and it's gonna be an online church.

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There is a sense in the Christian community of God bless you, that's awesome. But then there are others on the other extreme. Who are launching large, there are others who do the whole decentralized, in the middle where we you don't have a big gathering. We more have a big gathering to train leaders if anything else. And and I say, Mr. Edison, and Mrs. Edison, for that matter, please keep inventing that new light bulb. Let's see what God wants to bless in this year. And it's going to be the church planters that are going to discover it. And others are gonna say, we should learn something from them. We should try that. So this freedom to experiment JJ, what all are you giving permission to at Journey church?

JJ Vasquez: Well, I just want to say to what you said, to answer Carey's question, I'm with you. I think that it's not that there's one model that's better than the other model. All but that there are people who Jesus loves that are not going to be reached in a church like mine.

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Because of the amount of people that are in it, or because of the style love it, and so, I'm a church plant coach with ARC, and also with a CMN, the Church Multiplication Network, which is the church planting arm of the Assemblies of God and they're both different, but they both have the same mission and I think it's great when you understand what they both do and how they do it differently, ARC really has a playbook and it's "launch large." That's how we teach there. That's how we train there. And you know the average church just launching with ARC are launching somewhere like to 200 attendance size, and CMN is totally different.

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Warren Bird: And in our survey across the years about 18% launched large with 200 or more. Little dip in 2020, but then backed by 2021 continue, sorry, JJ.

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JJ Vasquez: No, that's great data. And then at CMN, their model's a little different. We've helped plant biker churches that are meeting somewhere else. We've helped plant home churches.

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And there are just people that are going to identify with certain manifestations of church. You know, I think one of my favorite stories to teach this is when Jesus is walking on the water and the disciples were afraid because they thought it was a ghost. And I've always taught that to our church. We have to be ready to see Jesus when he appears in ways we don't expect him to and in churches that look in ways that we don't expect them to, and I think the more pastors that listen to this podcast. Particularly in this part here. I think it's really going to help you. It's okay to have an appreciation for someone else's gift. Just don't let your appreciation turn into imitation. God, might have given you a very specific way to do church. Don't allow society's definition of success; X amount of people, right? That's not success. In heaven, there's a party when one person gives their life to Christ. Just one. That's the way God called us to launch Journey Church, it was a launch large model. We have a multi-site model. We know who we are. But you might have a different, like you said, Warren said it might be Roblox. And by the way, Warren, the fact that you know what Roblox is if you really are a researcher, because I just found out what roadblocks was like in the last six months through my kids. And so you're more in the know than I am. But I think I think we've just got to shift the definition of success for these church planters, man. It's not about a big church. It's about the church that God called you to launch. Because there are some people that will not come to Christ in my church, because of the way it's structured. But they will in the one that God gave you the dream for.

[00:36:06.800]

Carey Nieuwhof: So JJ, let's drill down on your church plant story. So you plant in the greater Orlando area in 2016. What were some of the initial challenges you are trying to launch large, and I think a lot of people who listen know the ARC model you want to get out of the gate with funding, with the core team, with volunteers, 200 people, ideally, or more on your opening Sunday because we know it's going to be half of that the next week, right? We just know. And then you build up from a solid base. So what were some of the initial challenges that you ran into in planting Journey Church?

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JJ Vasquez: So many. Expectations, money, people, experience, I mean, where do we start? We launched with 400 at our launch. Yeah, it's exciting, right? And, and crazy though, because of the culture that we live in today, and the friends that I had, I thought, I don't know. I felt like we didn't succeed. That was my first lesson in learning not to tie...

Carey Nieuwhof: So 400 wasn't enough?

JJ Vasquez: It's never enough. That's the problem, right? That's the problem, because then I was feeling out 400 what I felt that 1,000, what I felt a 2000, what I felt at 3000, I feel the same way. So you can't tie your identity to those things. And so, yeah. Thank God I had an overseer, someone on our board who really spoke life into me and helped me just get my head right, because that was a huge win. But then we dipped to, about four months in, the lowest rate ever gotten was about 130. That was one of the hardest days. I'll never forget it. I can remember the message I preached.

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I can remember what the room looked like. I remembered that next off day after that, I remember wondering if I'd missed God. So there's that, there's the attendance challenge. I think the other challenge was just trying to figure out who I was. So I'm Puerto Rican. And I grew up in a kind of Spanish, Pentecostal church background. But God called us to launch at Winter Park. So if you know anything about Winter Park, Florida, the average age is retired, kind of 60 and above, very Caucasian. So I remembered my first message. I was like, listen, this is not my audience, God, I don't know why you called me here. This is Andy Stanley's audience. And so what I did was, I literally got a table, I got a TV, I got the chair. I'd never preached like that before in my life. But I was like, this is what this demographic needs. And I'm a big Andy Stanley fan. And so I was like, I'm just going to shift who I am. And that was such a bomb. I'm a really bad Andy Stanley. Most of us are really bad Andy Stanley's. There's only one.

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But I'm a good JJ. So I just had to really nail down who I was and lean into that, and then we started to see more growth at the church there. Because the church was young, we had financial struggles.

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I mean, every age group brings their own benefits. So like the older the age, the more commitment you're going to have, the younger the age, the more involvement, passion, but they ain't got no money.

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They're still going to college, you know, they're raising their little kids, you know, I remember having a conversation with someone on the team and I saw what they

had given one month and I was like, hey, you know, I want to teach you about this thing called tithing, it's 10%.

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And they're like, oh that is ten percent of my check. I was like, oh, okay.

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Well you know what? Let's pray about that. Let's ask the Lord for some favor, some blessing. But, yeah, that was a challenge.

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Building the team was hard because, you know, you don't have staff. So when you have a staff meeting, you're having to do it late at night when you should be with your family, or on the weekends when you should be with your family. Nobody can come in at 2:00 because they're at work, and your team is a bunch of volunteers. I wasn't paid for a year, and I went without a salary for a year and a half. Just living on the selling of my home and the cashing out of my retirement account, and just living by faith. And so, honestly so many challenges, it's a miracle that we got through it and and I look back at it now and it's just so crazy what God did.

Carey Nieuwhof: I want to go back to the transformation in your teaching style, because I think we've all tried on different styles and kind of went oh yeah, that one didn't work.

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Was it abrupt? Did you just ditch the TV in the table one week, did you morph out of it? And then tell me what that did to the audience and what it did to you.

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JJ Vasquez: So, yeah. It was abrupt. I tried it for the first couple of months. That wasn't me. It was Andy Stanley style and I remember my wife just telling me one time. Just saying, be you. Just be you. If God called you to this city, he must have knew what the city needed. I remember she said something one time, if this city needed Andy Stanley, God would have put it in his heart to plant a church here.

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But he didn't, he put it in our heart. And so, be you. And so when I did that, we started to see the congregation get more diverse. And then when the congregation got more diverse, we started, when people were coming in our church I would ask

them. I remember any time I saw somebody who was white, I would stop them in the lobby and be like, why did you decide to come to our church?

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I swear, I ask them all the time because it was mostly just Hispanic people that were coming. Because in the beginning, I think every church planter needs to know this, as much as we all have dreams of having a diverse church, in the beginning you will attract who you are in the beginning. You will always attract who you are and that's okay.

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And they started to come and I asked them. I said, what made you pick Journey Church as your home? And they all said the same thing, and it was very humbling because then I realized God had a plan that I didn't realize, and they all said the same thing. They said, we love the diversity.

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Everything in this city is this way. Here, it's not this way, it's very diverse. And then I realized well, that's why God would send a thirty-year-old Puerto Rican to plant a church in one of the whitest cities in Central Florida, because he wanted diversity to come to this area of our state. And so God had a plan, but that really changed and shifted and ever since then, you know, it's been a lot more freeing just to be me and understand that I think I tried to be a church for everybody at the same time. And that's hard too. Once I realized that I could just be me and I can let people go to the other churches, where they identify more, boy, was that freeing. Then I had to shift, like, I'm not trying to grow Journey. I'm trying to grow the Kingdom.

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And so the same thing I said about all the different types of churches, I had to realize my church is a different type of church. And I just gonna own that. And I'm going to reach anybody that Journey can reach with my style of preaching. Maybe you don't like it because I shout too much, or run around too much, or I sweat too much. That's fine. There's another church down the street that is exactly what you need. And really coming to grips and accepting that idea that we're all kingdom, you know, like that's such a freeing feeling as a pastor and a preacher. To know that God gave me a gift to reach a certain type of person. And I can't reach someone else, that's someone else's job.

Carey Nieuwhof: Let's talk about the inflection point. So month four, you're down to 130. We all know what that feels like. If you've led a church for more than a couple of months, you know what that feels like. You're discouraged. What helped reverse that?

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JJ Vasquez: It was a couple of things and I think our culture wasn't wasn't right yet. We had to fix that. So we had a lot of stuff to fix. I think that the inflection points happen when preparation meets opportunity, like everybody's waiting for that event, that trigger, that catalyst. That catalyst, that moment will come, but you got to be ready for it. So, for us, it was a couple things. There's a couple of catalysts for us. There was, there was the Orlando Sentinel, which is one of the largest, the second largest in all of Florida, newspaper in all of Florida, the largest one I can remember. But second largest, they found out about our church, they came in and they saw that they were just a bunch of young people going to church.

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So they said, hey can we come and do a story? So we said yeah, sure. Well I didn't know that story ended up on the front page of the Orlando Sentinel.

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I still have the newspaper.

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It was at the same time that Trump threatened to shut down Congress with the budget stuff.

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And yeah, so like that's right there. And then right underneath the Senate and the Congress is a picture of me and our church.

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What happened was a bunch of people started coming. Now, here's the thing I tell people all the time because I don't want to give just that paper the glory there, obviously God, but had our church, not not gotten healthy, a bunch of people would've come, had a terrible experience, and gone back home. So if we weren't prepared for that, the opportunity would've fell flat. So you gotta be prepared. Then 2020 came. And so at that point, now, we're running probably over a thousand

people, than 2020 came. I think we were right before 2020, we were probably around 1,300. We were portable at the time. Everything shut down. We changed our venue five times in 2020. Five times. We'd joke about it. Every time I would get up to preach I'd be like, listen, if you want to know where we're having church next week, you're gonna need to have the gift of prophecy here. Because I don't know either. And so somebody tell me, somebody connect with the Lord. And five times, until finally we found an abandoned high lie stadium of that Warren got the chance to visit not too long ago, and sits about 1200 people. It was sitting empty, completely run down. We put money in. We invested in it.

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We were probably 1,200 before the pandemic, we had dropped down to 700. And then the building, though, was on the corner of one of the busiest intersections in Central Florida, I mean, 436 and 1792, anybody would know it. Its historic, Elvis played here, KISS played here, like it's a historic center, it's just old and rundown. And so we got in here and then in the last two years we've grown from the 700 to almost 3000. And it's been and it was another inflection point. I think the building had a little lot to do with that too, the location, but every moment we had gone through something as a church that helped prepare us for the next thing.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Super helpful and congratulations. Warren, we were talking about this episode, you and I emailed back and forth, and I said it would be really cool to talk about the findings but also get a church planter on.

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What do you see in JJ that is typical of church plants, but also atypical of leaders or church plants? Because you're probably on the high end of growth, you know, of churches planted 6-7 years ago, you would be certainly in the top 10th percentile, if not 90th percentile, or however they do that math, you would be you'd be up there. So Warren, what do you see typical and atypical?

Warren Bird: I want to do the typical first. JJ, you have, yes you love the Lord and you are passionate for him. I've listened to enough of your sermons, been in the worship, I don't ever want to assess something and say, oh yeah, and they're preaching this. You're spot-on in your heart for Jesus and in your desire to become more like him every day and that is just front and central.

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Beyond that, you're teachable. The word disciple means a learner. How many times in this interview have you just said, well, we learned this, we learned that, you and your team are discerning what's working, what's not. You took huge risk. You just like blew this off in a sentence. "Oh we sold our home and in cashd that in and used up all our savings," and you said that, clearly, not to get attention yourself, you almost buried it at the end of a sentence. But behind that is a huge sacrifice. And I know a little bit more of your story. Your parents did that, too. They sold their home and moved up to help you. You called in all the relatives. And that's very common for church planters. Anybody that likes us at all, we need help. Be part of this. And they were.

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JJ, besides huge risk in the family involvement, your first staff was all homegrown and you didn't know, and you were all learning together, and you'll probably experience the realities that some have found their sweet spot already. And that's where God is blessing, but they're not able to keep growing to new levels and you kind of add people in between them and it can get awkward, but that's all part of the delights of being able grow people. You told me when I asked you, now, here's a contrast, when I asked you, okay, so how did the core group get started? You told me you brought people into your home for leadership development.

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And that is markedly different from how most people would approach it because really if I as the leader can't reproduce myself into people who in turn reproduce themselves, then you have already put an immediate cap on where you're able to go.

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You have a boldness to ask for commitment and you're not ashamed for that. And I think I appreciate Carey going back to the inflection point. I can't think how many people would have said, okay, honey. We tried, we did our best and it was a great initial season, but here's where we're going to settle. You refused to settle because there are people to be reached. And you kept saying, how do we figure out how to connect the unchanging gospel to this changing culture?

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And connect more, get more disciple-making happening out there. And to this day, you're still thinking who's next.

JJ Vasquez: That's very kind. Thank you so much for sharing that.

Carey Nieuwhof: I think we all need a Warren Bird in our life, don't we all need a Warren Bird in our life? My goodness. You have the gift of encouragement. But there's a lot of validity in that. I want to talk about the leadership development sessions in your house early on. What did they look like? Because it would be tempting to do a Bible study. It would be tempting to gather people to hang out, build culture. Talk about leadership development, JJ.

JJ Vasquez: Yeah. So one of the challenges I shared about church planting early on is that your whole staff is volunteer, so they can't meet during the day. Your job isn't their job. They have their own jobs. And so we would have them on Sundays after church. And we would do them weekly. So, we would have set up, we do tear down, you know 5:00 AM, 6:00 AM, portable, trying to turn a high school into a church.

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And then you do a service, you have to put it all away and then instead of going home, I'd invite them all over the house and then we spend the next two hours, wins, losses, ways we can grow, and then also I'd bring a leadership teaching.

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I just knew early on, I wasn't going to be able to do it by myself, I knew we needed a team, and that was great. That was great because we didn't know who our leaders really were yet. You have some idea of who's going to be with you and then then you get into practice and then you start realizing oh man the one I thought was going to make it, they're not going to make it, and then this person I just met them and they're crushing it, they're doing great, and so it was really an opportunity for us to kind of sift through and just see who was meant to be with us in the next kind of phase. But yeah we still talk about those. We call them leadership labs, and we did it when our staff was volunteer on Sundays. Now we have them every Monday with our paid staff.

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But before that it was just, so we still do them, but now the people get paid to be here. They have them on on Monday during the day.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Warren, one of the research points is that the larger the funding, the more money at church has at launch, the larger the initial attendance. Can you explain that from a data perspective, and then JJ I'm going to ask you, how did you

secure your initial fundraising other than selling everything and moving on, right? So I'd love to talk about that.

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Warren Bird: I need to underscore that that funding was not given entirely to you as the church planter. That does not birth a church if it's hey, we got this big, you know, pack full of money, go plant a church. You have to have ownership in raising the funds yourself.

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Carey Nieuwhof: So, if somebody comes along, drops a half million in your bank account and says go plant a church, that doesn't guarantee success. That's such a good distinction.

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Warren Bird: No, it doesn't. But I would put a fork in the road there. The one person says that. Okay, praise God, now I'm gonna go raise some more money. Do that. Yeah. And we're gonna have an incredible impact. Versus saying half a million, we're set, we don't have to do anything with finances for the next couple of years, we can run with it. That's not going to work out. So the visionary to to call for committing my life to Jesus Christ is the same visionary who's able to baptize my wallet and show me how to put God first first in everything.

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Now that said, let me go to, well, the funding sources are multiple, we ask in this survey, is your church self-supporting? And a surprising 20% of them started self-supporting from day one. By year three 78% were financially self-supporting, but the sources of income were fascinating, I gave them like 10 categories. Does your spouse have a full-time job? Surprising amount, yes, that's contributing toward. That's, Carey, another contrast with 20 years ago, when you're looking to have just one income source for the family. I asked, did your relatives kick in pre-launch? And 8% of the funding came from relatives. Did you have a side job? An amazing number of people intentionally had that side job, so there were multiple income sources leading up to the launch.

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But, that said now Carey, now I'm ready to agree with you, that the larger the kitty, the larger the scale on which you can launch, and the larger the impact that you have, assuming you've got a commensurate core group as well.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Okay, that's fascinating. And it sounds to me, tell me if this is a simplification because I can do that with stats. Sounds like skin in the game. You need skin in the game, right? Okay. All right, is there a number like \$100,000 dollars? \$200,000? Half a million? Like what was there a number that seemed to really help?

[00:55:09.200]

Warren Bird: I did come up with a number. You download the report to the ECFA.org/surveys, you can see the numbers but the problem is, think the downtown Cleveland church planter vs JJ and Winter Park. This is two different economic groups being targeted, two different communities, in terms of rental and standards. It's really dangerous, I think, to hold up a single number and say, you need this much. It's much more you need to say, you need to be able to to fund it and and cast the stewardship vision.

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. Good point, okay. So JJ on the ground, what did that look like for you guys and for Journey Church?

JJ Vasquez: So our total launch budget, and having done this with the other churches, I would say that ours is probably on the lower end. So if you're looking for more of a specific number, I've seen the churches that I've worked with, Warren's got the actual data, but just anecdotally speaking, with churches that have launched, I've seen a lot of churches launch with about \$150,000-\$200,000, or more.

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That's what it has cost to launch a church, depending where you are, your city determines a lot of that. So our budget was probably \$140,000. That would be performed on the lower end of what I've seen with churches. The sources for that were, the majority of that was honestly, we sold our home, we cashed out my retirement account, and then we partnered with two organizations that gave us each about \$40,000 each. And so that was the other half of it. And the smallest part of it came from visiting with other churches, asking for help from other churches in the city, from people's tithes, they were tithing even though the church hasn't launched yet, and so the three buckets were our own investment, which, skin in the game. I mean it's a whole thing when you when you sold it all and you're just like, this has got to work, this has got to work. I had to apologize to my Lead Pastor when I was as a Youth Pastor. Because he would always tell me to evangelize and I would always tell him and I be like Pastor, I'm inviting people to church. I'm inviting people to

church. Then I became a church planter and my family's livelihood depended on growing this church. Eternity should be enough motivation. I know that someone's going to listen to this podcast and be like bro, don't you believe in heaven and hell? That should be enough. I'm with you. I'm sorry. I'm human. That was motivation. The other motivation was, we've got no plan B here. This has got to work and so I was out there witnessing to everybody that I could because we were just all in. And so that's so those are the three buckets that it came from. I've seen churches with half a million dollars not make it.

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Warren Bird: How early did you start teaching stewardship?

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JJ Vasquez: I waited too long. I waited too long. I waited about a year before I taught it because I was afraid as a church plant that our reputation in this city would develop for this money. But then I really had to wrestle with that myself. And do you believe what the Bible says or not? If you believe what the Bible says about stewardship and if you believe what the Bible says about generosity, why would you withhold these kinds of blessings from people? So I had to wrestle with that internally. Now, we talk about it every year. We'll have a series on stewardship in some way, shape, or form every year, but it took me about a year to build up the courage as a young church planter to speak about the topic.

[00:58:56.400]

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, that was one of my questions. Did you raise even a meaningful percentage of the initial funding from your core? Because you get these outside sources, you cashed out your family, cashed out, you got these two sources and other churches. But like, when you thought about the 75, 100, 200 volunteers you launched with, were they contributing from the early stages or not so much?

[00:59:23.400]

JJ Vasquez: Yeah, that we did ask if you can be a part of the launch team, we're asking for three things. Asking that you join us in prayer, asking that you serve, and we're asking that you begin to tithe here and call this church here your home.

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Carey Nieuwhof: And Warren, did you have any other questions on funding or observations on funding before we shift gears?

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Warren Bird: Well, let me just talk about the ratio of launch team to kick-off attendance, because that has to do with the finances. We found this about one to three on average. So if you have 10 people in your core team, you're likely to launch with 30. And then as Carey mentioned earlier, you kind of drop back for weeks to three and sometimes four and then you grow from there. If you have 100 people in your core group, you're likely to have 300 at your launch or if you have 1,000 in your core group, you're likely to have 3,000. And that impacts your finances. Many church planters today kind of have multiple launches. Well, we're going to have the first public Sunday. We're going to have the grand opening Sunday. We're going to...where you just keep starting level playing field all over again.

[01:00:30.700]

Each with a different size core group, if you will, each of whom has the excuse to invite friends, and each of whom has the fields, the responsibility. Hey, I need to, I need to make this happen financially as well.

[01:00:43.800]

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, that totally checks out Rich Birch may have gotten this from you. You guys know Rich, but you know he always says if you want 200 you need 75 core committed volunteers who are there. And it's basically that 3 to 1 ratio. So you must have had about 125, 130 core people to launch at 400 is that about right side? Does that math check out?

[01:01:06.400]

JJ Vasquez: I would add a layer to that. And again, this is just my story. Warren's here for the hard facts, the data. But my story is, I think you're going to be 3x. I think that's where you settle.

[01:01:19.700]

That would be my suggestion. So, we launched with 400, but we settled that 3x. So I would, I would add a layer to that.

[01:01:27.500]

Carey Nieuwhof: Why? Because your great aunt and grandmother came and all these other well-wishers came and so on and so forth?

JJ Vasquez: 100% 100%

Carey Nieuwhof: Got it. Plus all the people from the church that kind of launched you came over just to applaud.

[01:01:42.400]

JJ Vasquez: Yeah exactly. Yeah.

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Carey Nieuwhof: So JJ, I'd love to know in what ways do you think, cause you've had tremendous growth. What is your budget today compared to 2016 \$140k to kick it off?

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JJ Vasquez: Oh, man, you know, I was looking at it just the other day. I mean , remember I told you it took us a year to teach on stewardship? So when you hear this it'll make sense. We bring in a week, now, what we brought in our first year.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Wow. Wow.

[01:02:21.800]

JJ Vasquez: And that's because I did not touch on that subject. And if I would encourage church planters, you need to touch it sooner. Don't be afraid of what you think you're afraid of. If it's not your heart, if that's really not your heart, then you don't have to be afraid of coming off that way. If you really are in it to honor God and to see people live a blessed life, then be obedient to teach in the Bible.

[01:02:46.900]

Warren Bird: And JJ, I like your words. Earlier, I used the word stewardship and you kind of corrected, to say generosity. Much better word. And now the blessed life and caring for others, those are the words that resonate today.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, it's interesting. You know I had a fear of it as well partly because I hadn't heard it talked about growing up in church. It's like the only time you hear about money is when the pastor needs money, and I fell into that trap, and then had to do a reboot. So, how did you come over overcome your fear? Mentors.

[01:03:28.000]

JJ Vasquez: You know, I read a lot, I try and learn, I'm grateful for the overseers in our life, the board that we have, and I was just sharing with them some of the wrestling matches that I was having with the topic and it was one of our board members, who's a pastor of the church said, "Hey man. Do you believe what the Bible says? If you believe what the Bible says, then don't be afraid to preach the Bible." And I mean, that Jesus talks more about money than any other topic. And so it matters, it matters to God.

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And that's why we have to talk about it, and that's actually how, that has informed the way I preach about it.

[01:04:04.200]

So you can go back on our YouTube, anytime you see money in the title of one of our YouTube sermons, you'll hear me start it off by saying we're talking about this because Jesus talks about this because this matters and because we want to be a church that is speaking to the things that you're talking about around your kitchen table. And here's what I know. One of those conversations are about his finances. Whether you're a young adult looking to pay for college, a parent looking to send your kid to college, trying to move into a home, trying to get a car, and stressed out with debt.

[01:04:37.300]

It's something that is, which is why God talks about it so much, right, because where your money is there your heart is also. Where your treasure is there your heart is also, and so, that was for me was the shifting moment for me and just knowing that, it's in because, you know, preachers preach the Bible. So when you realize it's in there and that's just the truth. Gotta do it.

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, and a big inflection point. I agree with you, you know, there were couples. If you don't talk about money, there were couples on their way to church who had a fight about money in the car on the way to church, right?

[01:05:07.500]

And so you're gonna just ignore that.

[01:05:08.900]

You'll talk about prayer. You talk about the Bible. You won't talk about one of the biggest tension points in their life. And the aha moment for me was, oh, I'm going to

talk about it when we don't need it. Well, you kinda have it every week, but you know, we're not asking anything today.

[01:05:23.200]

But I want to talk about it from the perspective of what I want for you, not what I want from you. I want you to pay cash for your next car. I want you to save for your kids retirement, wouldn't it be nice not to take a vacation on Visa but to pay cash for it, like we actually want to help you with that and the Bible has a lot to say about that, and once I turned that corner, it was so easy to talk about it. I was excited to talk about it but that took me a long time.

[01:05:47.600]

JJ Vasquez: That's so great. And one of the things that I say when I talk about the topic is, because you touched it right there, talking about it when you don't need to. So, I'm like, here's some things you need to know about our church. Okay? Our church is zero debt, which really means we don't own property, but I can say that now that we don't own property, I can say that. I can get a front of our church and say just in case you think we have some ulterior motives for this money. We have zero debt as a church, we don't owe anybody anything. 0%. Also our staffing salary budget we're below. 40% of our annual income, the average church in America more close to the 50%. You need to know that just we're stewarding it well. You also need to know that we budget 90% of last year's income is our operating on income from this year. So we take 90% of last year. That's what I just need you to know that we're good. We are so good here at Journey Church, find it we're good, are you? Let's help you write and then let's talk about it.

[01:06:49.500]

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow. So you must have a robust volunteer culture if your staffing, I mean, I follow ratios with church staff, like you're right. Most churches are 50 to 60% or if you're getting on the healthier side, and what that means is, let's say you're a million-dollar church, you know, your payroll is somewhere between 50 to 60% of that million. If you're a little bit healthier, it's in the 40s. If you're super healthy, it's 40 or lower. And what that actually means is you have more volunteers, is what it means.

[01:07:18.200]

So what are you doing about volunteer culture? Because when I talk to leaders the number one post-covid issue in addition to, let's get people back, or where did all

the people go, is, we've lots of people, we don't have volunteers anymore. How did that hit your church?

Warren Bird: Just before JJ jumps in, let me comment on what happened during the pandemic. Churches wanted to keep their staff. The pandemic shut things down. So the staff who had been training lay people moved to take the jobs and other duties as described that the lay people had.

[01:08:01.000]

And then after the pandemic, you've got all these staff doing what volunteers used to do. Now, you not only have to woo people back to church, but to invite them to serve and to invite them to take the things that staff had been doing there. Like well, you've got somebody doing it, so it's a really awkward time of shifting.

[01:08:22.100]

Carey Nieuwhof: I have not heard that theory. Thank you for sharing that. Yeah, that's interesting that really is. Plus, everybody reset, right? People left, people reassessed, so talk about high volunteer engagement and how that's played out at Journey Church.

JJ Vasquez: Yeah, so we had to make it a focus.

[01:08:42.700]

So we operate kind of under Patrick Lencioni, The Advantage, kind of the idea of what's the most important thing? So, we've had the most important thing now for, I want to say two years.

[01:08:52.700]

Every year we have a quarterly meeting where our staff gets together and the most important thing for the last two years, coming out of the pandemic has not been growth, has not been increasing income has not been developing a simulation processes or launching a second campus or going multi-site. The most important thing for the last two years has been volunteer growth, 20% year-over-year, and volunteer retention 80% year-over-year and we developed the Internal systems and software. We actually have a software developer on staff here who created a software for us to be able to track those metrics on demand. She calls it soul tricks which I love.

[01:09:34.200]

And so she uses soul tricks and we are able to track on each team. So I can tell you in our greeters, I can tell you in our kids, the percentage growth and the percentage retention. And we're trying to get our teams to those to that kind of a metric; 20% growth year-over-year, 80% retention. And then the way we do that is we have a structure of leadership, which probably a lot of churches would be familiar with, kind of directors, coordinators, team leaders, kind of the Jethro principle of one overseeing a certain amount. And then we have special events throughout the year that are targeted toward each layer of leadership.

[01:10:16.200]

Each event falls into one of three categories, it's either some type of celebration, it's some type of development, or it's inspiration.

[01:10:23.200]

And so we have those separated throughout our calendar and we have a leader book that we give to all of our dream teamers. We spent a lot of money, we spend a lot of time, but we're intentional, and I think half the problem is figuring out the problem, and I think once you figure out the problem, then you ask the right questions, right? Then you can read the right books and you can listen to the right podcast, then you can have the right conversations with your team. So, we just realized that was going to be a pain point for us coming out of the pandemic and that's been the most important thing for the last two years. And we haven't moved on because we get closer to that number but we haven't hit that number yet. And I've just told our staff, they asked me on our last off-site, like hey when are we gonna like talk about something else? And I'm like when we fix it.

[01:11:11.100]

Carey Nieuwhof: Well, that's a really strategic choice JJ, because I think, you know, if I heard you correctly, you said you dip down to about 700 post-pandemic, so you're almost half the size that you were heading into the pandemic, and Florida had a shorter pandemic than a lot of a lot of places. But, you know, I think a lot of leaders just panicked and pivoted to attendance, attendance, attendance, and you were smart. Now, interestingly enough, I heard you also say, I just want to confirm this, you're running just shy of 3,000 now on the weekend? Alright. So you've almost quadrupled in size, you have quadrupled in size. I assume there's been a financial increase with that. That's huge growth in the last two years.

[01:12:02.300]

But you're staying focused on the volunteer metric.

JJ Vasquez: Oh yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof: I want you to unpack that a little bit more because I think that's a great strategic choice that 98th percentile L would never make by. I commend you for doing it, so drill down on that a bit.

[01:12:17.800]

JJ Vasquez: Yeah. Okay, I'm a metaphor guy, but I can't think of one right now, but I will try. I'm trying to search for something that, like, why do you get up in the morning? If somebody at my job is waiting for me. If I don't show up to my job, my job is not going to get done. I have a responsibility. I have a commitment. Average church attendance, you're the data guy or I've got Warren here. Tell me what is it? What is the average Church attendance a month?

[01:12:57.700]

Carey Nieuwhof: Well you said the median is 63.

Warren Bird: You mean frequency of attendee?

[01:13:01.300]

JJ Vasquez: In a month.

[01:13:02.400]

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, that's probably changed too, but it used to be 1 in 3, I bet you it's moved to 1 in 4. Warren, do you have different stats?

[01:13:06.200]

Warren Bird: Somewhere between one and two times a month for the typical church attendee.

JJ Vasquez: So let's take that. So that means that the other two times or three times that person woke up and told themselves, which we would never get because we're all pastors here, told themselves, I think I'm not going to go to church today. And part of the reason was, because if I don't go, it's not like somebody's counting on me. It's not like somebody's waiting for me there. It's not like I have any form of responsibility or investment there. I'm just not gonna go. We've realized that if we can get people on teams, that's a reason to come to church every Sunday.

[01:13:50.300]

That's a reason to come to church. Somebody's counting on you to do something to impact somebody's life. And that set in, it's more than, because I can hear someone in the chat, when they listen, it's guilt. You know, it's shame. It's like if you don't come, you're dropping the ball. No, its purpose, right? It's like it's like they're this is why I get to be a part of the church.

[01:14:15.900]

Like as pastors, we have to realize that our job is not to do the ministry.

[01:14:19.600]

And according to Paul, our job is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. And so, when I understand that, then my philosophy has to change as well, and now I gotta start getting them on the team, so that they can feel the weight of it in a good way. And also the celebration, and also just, I'm a part of something big. And I want to speak to the pastor or the leader who's like, I don't wanna burn people out.

[01:14:48.800]

That's the big thing. I don't want to burn people out, we'll hire someone to do that. Are you a comic book fan? anybody on this video?

[01:15:00.800]

Carey Nieuwhof: Not really, but we have tens of thousands of listeners who tune in.

[01:15:06.400]

JJ Vasquez: So there's a volume where Superman dies, okay, in the comics and Metropolis, the crime rate in Metropolis. What do you think happened to the crime rate in Metropolis when Superman died?

Carey Nieuwhof: It went up.

JJ Vasquez: Yeah, you would think that but all of your comic book fans who are listening to this podcast right now will tell you that the crime rate actually dropped. And the reason why the crime rate drops when Superman died is because everybody was waiting around for Superman to stop the bad guys. And when they realized there was no more Superman, everyone decided I have to do my part.

Carey Nieuwhof: Wow, that's a great metaphor.

JJ Vasquez: We have too many pastors and leaders trying to be Superman, trying to do it all, hire people to do it all, and so people are coming to church and they're just

receiving, and that's all that they're doing, and they're not stepping into their god-given design. When Superman dies, Metropolis steps up and realizes, if I don't do this, no one else is going to do it. My city doesn't need JJ. My city needs me, my city needs my brother, my city needs my sister, my city needs my gifting, my calling. It's just amazing. And then, it also answers the question, Carey and Warren, why people don't care, why don't people care about church? You know, we're all pastors, I know we'll all get this one, David and Aruna.

[01:16:19.900]

David goes to a place to get land. He goes to a Aruna, and he's offered to buy the land and Aruna says, you know, you can have it. And then David looks back at Aruna and he says, I will not give the Lord something that cost me nothing. Because what David knows, that we need to remind ourselves, is that value is attached to sacrifice, to cost. When you pay for something, you care more about that thing, and I'm not going to give God something. And so now funny enough, the land that he buys, we all know that becomes the Temple Mount so the church was actually built on sacrifice, which is my next connection. We try and take the sacrifice away from people by doing the work, but we're actually taking away their investment, and their care, and their love in the local church, b doing that.

[01:17:09.800]

And so, we've got to give them a chance to pay, so that they can feel that purpose that value that love.

[01:17:18.300]

I've got 5 different pairs of shoes. My wife's got 30 different pairs of shoes in her closet, but there's one pair of shoes, man. It's up high. I don't know a lot about shoes, but I'll tell you that pair, I bet you that pair's expensive because it's up high. It's not what the rest of the shoes, it's off in the corner.

[01:17:32.900]

We treat things differently that have higher costs attached to them.

[01:17:38.900]

So we've got to make the gospel accessible, but we've got to make church come at a cost.

[01:17:46.600]

Carey Nieuwhof: I can see why you are probably getting closer to that goal.

[01:17:51.000]

That's very encouraging, very inspiring. So, man, we could cover a lot of ground. I want to ask you a couple more questions.

[01:17:59.000]

JJ, you know, we've talked almost exclusively about physical attendance showing up in the building, but you have a really robust online presence.

[01:18:06.700]

I mean great YouTube presence. Obviously, you take video seriously, you livestream. So, you're kind of bursting at the seams in person, but you've really ramped up your online presence. Do you want to talk about why?

[01:18:21.300]

And then also the specific things that you're doing there.

[01:18:25.300]

JJ Vasquez: Yeah, absolutely. Well, let's talk about why. The why is because, and I think there's a pushback now, some people are afraid that if we go too much into online, we're going to see a dip in local attendance.

[01:18:34.300]

Carey Nieuwhof: That's a question today, again. I hear from it all the time, which is why I'm asking the question.

JJ Vasquez: Yeah am I gonna cannibalize, is it going to eat it up, are people not going to come, and I get it, it's valid and I don't want to play it down. Just for me, I've got one goal, but two goals. Yes, I want to build this church but also I want to get people connected to community, but I also have this goal of expanding the kingdom. And so if it's gonna help me reach people, then that's what I want to do more than anything. God didn't call me to populate an auditorium, he called me to populate heaven. And so whatever is going to help populate heaven, that's what I want to be about.. And so we put a lot of money into it. We get the expensive cameras, we do what we can because we know that we're going to reach people online more than we will in person.

[01:19:27.500]

It's an easier invite to church to share a link from a YouTube sermon than it is to get you to put on clothes, put your perfume on, get your makeup done, and come to the church on Sunday. If I want to introduce you to the gospel sharing a YouTube link. Man, that's like the easiest thing in the world, it's easy for the receiver, it's easier for the for the Christian trying to be an evangelist, it's just so simple. We get so many people that come to the church because of it, and we're reaching people that I could have never reached, I mean, can I share just two quick stories? So one, some of our biggest financial gifts have come from people that have never been in person at our church. I mean, some of our biggest financial gifts, just, thank you so much for what you do, your church is ministering to me and my family.

[01:20:14.900]

End of the year offering gift, there's that.

[01:20:18.200]

We had baptisms recently, we had a family that lives in Miami, which is about four hours south of us in Orlando. They found out we were having baptism Sunday, they drove up for that Sunday just to get baptized in person, and then drove back home. But my favorite online story is a couple who was living together.

[01:20:35.800]

Not married, driving down the road in California, someone shared our sermon, our YouTube, they listened to it while driving.

[01:20:44.700]

They pulled over on the side of the road. This is their story. Pulled over on the side of the road, repented, came back to the Lord saying hey we've got to get right. We can't be living this way anymore. We need God's help.

[01:20:58.300]

They had a kid already, but we gotta make some changes.

[01:21:01.400]

They got on a plane, flew to Orlando, Florida. Now, this isn't sustainable right? You're not gonna build your church this way, but there's building your church, and then there's just expanding the kingdom. Got on a plane, flew to Orlando, got baptized on baptism Sunday, shared their story in the middle of the pools, and then we married them in my office after the baptism. So they got married and baptized on

the same day. It's really cool. And that's all because of the online presence, being able to reach people through that way. And so, I'm just such a big fan, a big believer. Now, I do think that and I hope this doesn't come off any kind of way, but I think you would agree that every leader has strengths.

[01:21:41.800]

And so, you've got to look at your strengths, if your church has the strength, and if your leader has that strength in that communication, and that online, then you need to double down on that. But if your strength is something else, building teams, creating systems, I think you got a double down on that.

I think early on we realized what we could be good at at Journey and we put our resources behind that to try and double down on our strengths, and then bring other people around us who can help us in our weaknesses. So, system stories, and I love online. I love that we are able to reach people.

Carey Nieuwhof: I love that part of it too, for sure. Warren, any data or observations on church plants and technology?

Warren Bird: Yeah, let's divide it into here to stay and the jury's still out. Here to stay is, people check out your church by its website first. It used to be the parking lot was first impression. The website, whatever size church you are, they're going to check it out. They're going to ask two questions. Fundamentally, are people like me there? And is this a scary factors or something that is going to weird me out too much?

[01:22:52.000]

Also, the newcomer connection. Now it may not be their first week there, but scan the you are the QR-code, tell us either your email or your phone or both, and that becomes a primary communication tool. I'm just amazed at, especially the younger generation, so willing to give that up. But carrying it further, hybrid stuff, like my wife and I just finished a couple's marriage class at our church. We kicked it off in person, we ended it with a happily ever after party afterwards, but all the nights of the group were online. So this couple with five kids, you know, they put the last kid in bed, they flopped down on the sofa, embraced each other, and were part of the class. They would never have gotten a sitter, driven somewhere, and maybe one week, but not week, after week, after week. So, the hybrid experience is here to stay. Now, where the jury is still out for churches large and small is not the evangelism and the outreach, and JJ, such a wonderful Story. The California story, those will happen and now due to the pandemic, the gospel's in every language accessible all

around the world for people to hear. It's a brilliant strategy as one of the silver linings of the pandemic. But, is it primarily a member equipping and evangelistic strategy?

[01:24:19.200]

Or is it also a discipleship strategy? Can discipleship also happen at the same level? Now, granted, I can't hug, I can't, you know, like Good Friday for me. I'm not that emotional but every time I do one of those crosses where I nail the nails in and that's me nailing the nails. We can't do that online, but in person it moves me. So there's certain in person that is it better, is it not? I was just last week with a bunch of executive pastors from mega churches of a particular denomination and they're ambivalent, you know, they're still deciding what to do. There are still there are a few Pioneer. Carey, you wrote the foreword to Tim Lucas' Liquid Church, and Liquid Church 5500 before the pandemic says, okay, we may reach thousands in person, but let's figure out how to seamlessly reach tens of thousands of people beyond that. And church plants are, with whatever their capacity level, depending on their size, are likewise saying, can we have an online impact of discipleship even beyond the broadcasting? So jury's still out on a lot of things, but I'm excited about the possibilities.

Carey Nieuwhof: That's a good summary. Wow, we've covered a lot of ground. Anything else that we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about before we wrap up?

Warren Bird: Carey, you graciously primed us with some questions and one of them is, what mistakes do you see are being made? And and I'd like to highlight something JJ said early on, Ephesians 4:11-12. Not equipping the Saints to do the work of the ministry.

[01:26:08.900]

And that maybe that I need to do it all myself, that the, the Superman analogy that you gave or it may be that I'm not doing a very good job of equipping the Saints. And, you know, I'm teaching them, but not training them, and that factor of releasing people into their God-given ministry makes all the difference in the effectiveness and growth, not just of a church plant, but of any church.

[01:26:42.400]

Carey Nieuwhof: JJ. mistakes, you're seeing or mistakes you've made? You talked about a few, so feel free to just throw it out there.

[01:26:50.000]

JJ Vasquez: I'll throw one in to close out that probably doesn't get spoken about enough.

[01:26:56.200]

And so, to Warren's point, 100%, you've got to equip the saints for the work of the ministry.

[01:27:02.400]

But I think when people ask me, what's one thing that I wish I would have done differently, that's the question I get all the time when I meet with church planters. What's one thing you wish you would him differently?

[01:27:10.000]

And my answer is always the same, and they're always discouraged when they hear it. They're always like, I thought you just say something different and my answer is, I wish I would have prayed more. I think I underestimated the spiritual weight of trying to take territory, literally trying to take territory away from the enemy when you're planting a church.

[01:27:33.700]

I was all about the strategies, I was all about the system's, I was all about the approaches, I was all about the branding and the logo and because I figured you know, my yes was enough.

[01:27:45.900]

But really committing to a prayer life, it's about saying yes every day, it's about re-surrendering. So in 2023, we've spent probably the least we have on marketing in this year, and we've grown the most just in the four months already. And the only thing we've done different is add a Saturday morning, every week, prayer service. It's the only thing we've done different. And I think hearing, you know, what was going on in Asbury. And I think there's a move coming to our country if it's not already here. And if the church is gonna make a shift somewhere because we're all starting to look alike, you know, we all serve coffee in the lobby. We all have lights. There's only one thing you can't copy from me.

[01:28:30.700]

There's only one thing, you can't copy. There's only one thing you can't transplant. You got to go get it yourself, and it comes out of cost, and there's no dollar amount, and that's the presence of God. And at least from where we stand, I think it just comes through prayer, I just encourage, I know there's a lot to think about. I know you've got to be a business person, and you've got to be a marketer, and you've got to be a student, and you've got to be a conflict resolution guy, and you've got to be a counselor, and you've got to be a mom, and you've got to be a dad, like, I know all that. But above all of those things, you have to be a son or daughter of God. You've got to be a son or daughter of Christ above all those things. So that would be my one mistake that I see a lot of church planters making.

[01:29:04.500]

Carey Nieuwhof: I don't know that we can top that. That's a really good one to go out on, man. Warren, any final thought or word?

[01:29:15.200]

Warren Bird: Yeah, just to underscore the key difference church planters make. Church planters speak a certain language to a certain cohort, just like a youth leader connects with the youth group. They are an irreplaceable group who understands the next generation, whatever that is, someone in their 20s, late teens, or early 30s, they get the metaphors, they speak in the expressions, they identify with the things that are being watched, streaming or otherwise, and that group can reach a certain segment, the next segment of American society, that no one else can do. So JJ, it was so encouraging to come and worship at Journey and see how many young adults, people your age and a little bit younger, are beginning their spiritual journey, and that's the story of church planting over and over.

JJ Vasquez: Well, thank you, Warren, for paving the way. I think when I first met you, I said, man, I read three or four of your books already. And so thank you for paving the way, for being a leader. If we've gone anywhere, it's because we stand on the shoulders of people like yourself. We stand on the shoulders of leaders and pastors who have come before us, and we're just learning and growing on the work that they've done, and the work that you've done. So, thank you so much for for being a pioneer and a mentor to so many people, including myself.

Warren Bird: Well I can't win the world Christ, but you can, and I can help you do it. So that's my joy.

[01:30:49.000]

Carey Nieuwhof: And I think Warren actually writes three or four books a month. I'm pretty sure that's his current monthly output.

JJ Vasquez: I'm behind, I've gotta catch up.

Carey Nieuwhof: JJ, give us where people can track with you and your church online. Where can people find you on the interwebs?

[01:31:02.700]

JJ Vasquez: Yeah @journeyorl is our church Instagram. Journeyorl.com is our church website. Mine is @jj_vasquez and that's where we are. Thank you for asking.

[01:31:16.200]

Carey Nieuwhof: Awesome, awesome. And Warren. Tell us more more about where people can find you and these incredible data sets that you produce through the ECFA.

Warren Bird: ECFA, and Carey, you were just recently on our podcast and did a great job talking about the leaders soul.

[01:31:32.700]

ecfa.org/surveys for some of my research, and for churches that want to be certified in integrity, accredited, 7 Integrity standards that honor God and ultimately, not just helped win the world for Christ, but raised up more donors, check that out too. My next book coming off, the press is at resiliencefactor.info and it's about how to do teams that are unbreakable, and the potential of teams is way untapped, especially coming out of the pandemic.

[01:32:16.700]

Carey Nieuwhof: Well Warren Bird, JJ Vasquez. Thank you so so much. I really appreciate you both. Thanks for all the great work that you do. And thanks for being with us today.

Man, I so appreciated that conversation. And what a great one. Two punch to write all the data and the research from Warren and then real life stories and application from JJ. So if you want more, we've got it all in the show notes for you. You can simply go to careynieuwhof.com/episode574. You'll find it there and that's free. And that's free because we partner with some incredible people, like Compassion, if you are looking for a mission strategy for your church to get involved internationally, to supplement or to start what you're doing internationally, go to

compassion.com/carey to explore the resources Compassion has available for your church.

[01:33:03.600]

And then make sure you grab my Preaching Cheat Sheet. Go to preachingcheatsheet.com. It's absolutely free. You can download it for you, send it to your team, I want to help you be a better communicator.

[01:33:16.400]

Well, we got a lot of great podcast coming up.

[01:33:20.200]

Seth Godin is coming up, so let's see, Katelyn Beatty, Scott Lyons, Kevin Kelly, KK, that's going to be a lot of fun, Judah and Chelsea Smith. Jon Acuff, John Lennox, a brilliant professor on AI. We're gonna talk about that.

Richard Foster, Miroslav Volf, Dave Ramsey, and so much more, but next episode, if you subscribe for free, you're not going to miss it, and wherever you're listening to this, make sure you hit the subscribe button.

[01:33:47.900]

You can check out the founder of Ritz-Carlton, so this is the third time he's been on the show, and I just love spending time with Horst. We talked about how the origin of "my pleasure," you know what Chick-fil-A says, they don't say you're welcome. They say my pleasure, we straighten out how that happened. Horst may have had something to do with it. The secret to staying curious, fit, and contributing at the age of 84, and the power of not being average. Here's an excerpt:

Horst Schultze: I mean, come on Christians. What the heck do you want done? You want to be mediocre? You want to be average? Average is the bottom of good and top of bad, it does nothing. I mean, what is this? I want to be known in this town as the absolute finest.

[01:34:31.700]

Where you belong, where you get a message that is of value. But of course, that's where you screw up at your churches, you know. Let me give you a message, okay? Okay and don't be mad with me. I'm European, okay? Go into the churches, go into the churches in Germany and France. They're empty, they're empty, because you

have nothing to offer, they have nothing to offer. They offer nothing anymore. And you are starting to do that left and right.

[01:35:02.300]

Carey Nieuwhof: What's really fun is we recorded this one live in Atlanta and some of you were there. So that's a pile of fun. Hey, thank you so much for listening. One more thing before we go. I love putting out every Friday, a short newsletter called On The Rise. And what it does is, I collect things every week, me and my team, that we find interesting, curious, helpful, relevant.

[01:35:21.700]

They can range from the profound some really powerful pieces that we've discovered to just the curious and the fun and it's free. So you can go to ontherisenewsletter.com. You can subscribe, we've got over 85,000 people who receive that newsletter every Friday. You are free to subscribe and unsubscribe at any time, so check it out. Go to ontherisenewsletter.com and you can start getting your copy as early as this week. Well, thank you so much for listening, everybody. I really hope that our time together today has helped you identify and scale a growth barrier you're facing.