

Speaker 1:

You know, here's how I feel about it. What are they going to do? Come get the ministry? You know what I'm saying?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah.

Speaker 1:

If it closed the doors today, we've ministered for 35 years. They can't take Jesus from me.

William Vanderbloemen:

No, that's good.

Speaker 3:

We realign our resources, our time, our money, whatever we have, around what we see God doing.

Speaker 4:

I tell our team, when tragedy strikes, our grace days are ahead. God's going to use this amputation of finances or staff or reputation or whatever happens. Jesus said, in this world, you'll find tribulation. It's hard to do ministry.

Holly Tate:

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast. I'm your host, Holly Tate, Vice President of Business Development here at Vanderbloemen. Today, we bring you our once-a-month series called How God Built This, where we talk with Christian leaders to find out the ways God has moved in their life to build their ministry. On today's How God Built This episode of the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast, our founder and CEO, William Vanderbloemen, talks with Pastor Mark Batterson, founding and lead pastor of National Community Church in Washington, D.C. NCC is focused on reaching emerging generations and meets in theaters throughout the D.C. Metro Area. NCC also owns and operates Ebenezer's Coffeehouse, the Miracle Theater, as well as the DC Dream Center. Fun fact: I actually worked at Ebenezer's Coffeehouse one summer when I was in college, and I can tell you firsthand what an amazing place NCC and Ebenezer's is.

Holly Tate:

Pastor Mark is also a New York Times best-selling author of 18 books, including The Circle Maker, In a Pit With a Lion on a Snowy Day, one of my favorite books, A Wild Goose Chase, and he's recently released Double Blessing, Whisper, and Play the Man. Tweet your takeaways from today's show using the hashtag vanderblast and make sure you check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group where we post behind-the-scenes content and giveaways. Without further ado, here's William's conversation with Pastor Mark.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, hey, everybody, thanks so much for tuning in. Holly's already told you our guest today, and he's really one of the cooler instruments God's used to build something cool. Mark, thanks so much for

joining us. If I heard this right, this is historic, right? This is the first recording in the history of ever from this location. Is that right?

Mark Batterson:

It is. And should I set the scene?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, let's do it.

Mark Batterson:

We're one mile from the U.S. Capitol Building.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yes.

Mark Batterson:

We're eight blocks from the NAT stadium.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yes.

Mark Batterson:

And we're in a building that was built in 1891. It's a city block across the street from the Navy Yard. It's the corner of Capitol Hill. And for about 100 years, it was the Navy Yard car barn. We bought it in 2014. And by the way, it's one corner of the prayer circle, the 4.7 mile prayer circle, that I prayed in 1996.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow.

Mark Batterson:

And we got the contract 18 years to the day. So we're really sitting in a miracle, about 100,000 square feet. And we can build out about another 150 right above us. Cost of real estate in D.C., not cheap. But the Lord's done some miracles, and so fun to be able to do the first recording. And it's so [inaudible 00:03:34] because God built this.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, no kidding. If you came into this town and said, "I think I want to find a quarter million dollars for a nonprofit which is faith-based, maybe even like a church," people would probably laugh you out of town, right?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, because a row house is 16 feet wide on Capitol Hill. You can't get into one for less than \$700,000 that's not a fixer upper.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow.

Mark Batterson:

Listen, there are some people listening in Silicon Valley or San Francisco, and you don't feel bad for us because maybe you've got us one notch up, but they aren't building more land. And when you're a mile from the Capitol, the cost of doing ministry is not cheap, which is why we've had to do some things outside the box.

William Vanderbloemen:

I want to finish up today with a look forward because this is so cool. And just a real short preview. Mark was really kind, took me around the building. We started looking at some old pictures, and what did you say? This is the last stop for the Navy's cars?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, the street cars. This was the last stop on what was route 54. So the street cars would get repaired and rerouted and then sent back across the city. So we branded the building The Capitol Turnaround, and I love double entendre, so The Turnaround... We believe that's what God wants to do with this place, in this space: turn people around and have a fun vision from a event venue to a child development center to a mixed-use marketplace to a coworking space.

William Vanderbloemen:

You talk about those cars coming in, and I think I've heard so many churches use some form of, bring them in, build them up, send them out. That's the mission, right?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

So that was the case with the cars, and now you're going to get to do it with the people of God. Very cool, but let's talk about that at the end. I want to back up. I had never started a church. I didn't understand church planting at all. And then I got the chance to start this business where we were going to help churches find their pastors, and now schools find their headmasters or presidents or all this. But it started just on a card table, and after about a year, I'm like, "Okay, now I get it." Starting a church isn't easy. I'd always gone to one that didn't exist, so walk us back to some of those first days. How'd you end up here? What did God do to you to make you crazy enough to want to come here and do this? Tell us a little bit of the early story.

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, and I might keep this short and sweet, but when I was 22, we tried to plant a church in the Chicago area. That was home. I was at Trinity seminary, and it's amazing how much you know at 22.

William Vanderbloemen:

I knew everything at 31.

Mark Batterson:

I had it all figured out, so that church plant failed. It was embarrassing.

William Vanderbloemen:

How long did it take to fail?

Mark Batterson:

About a year. In fact, it's why I have two master's degrees, because I went into the second one to buy time. And see if it could take root, but it did not. It was embarrassing, compass needle was spinning. But-

William Vanderbloemen:

How'd you know to close it? I didn't know we were going to go here, but this is interesting. How'd you know, okay time to call it?

Mark Batterson:

Well, I think, with the will of God, that there are two key pieces: called to and released from. There was just the moment that I felt like the Lord was releasing us from it, and to continue to do it would have actually been disobedience. Does that make sense?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, totally.

Mark Batterson:

You feel like a quitter, but I think anybody who's been in business, who's planted a church... Not every intent is going to succeed, so sometimes it takes more courage to fold up shop and then give it another go. We ended up, then... It created a willingness, shall we say, to go anywhere. In fact, the further away from here, the better. So that's how we ended up in D.C. And we actually came here to direct a bigger church ministry in the inner city, and it was about a year and a half later that we had an opportunity to give it another try. And it was scary because if you fail once, it can be an anomaly. But if you fail twice, it might be saying something about you. I think it took a little bit more courage to make the second attempt.

William Vanderbloemen:

That totally makes sense, and I see it all the time with guys that have given it a run, and if you plant a church and it doesn't work, that's not the end of your ministry at all. I think you guys who are successful church planters either have an extra chromosome or you're missing one or something. You're like the Green Berets of the kingdom that are doing this oddball thing. It's not better or worse than other guys, but... If it fails, it's not the end of the world, but twice? Well, that'd be an issue. So you come here, and you face the second plant. And did you just say, "okay?" Did you know anybody? How'd you get started?

Mark Batterson:

Nick Due, one person, my old roommate from college.

William Vanderbloemen:

So where two or three are gathered...

Mark Batterson:

Yes. So we started with a core group of 19 people, and that means six or eight people are there on time. So you're starting with pretty bare bones. And I actually like sharing this, William, because church experts would say, "If you're not 100 people by the end of your first year, or if you're not 200 people by the end of your second year, you're never going to go past those limits." Well, it took us five years to grow from 19 people to 250 people. And now thousands of people.

Mark Batterson:

I like sharing that story because, listen, there's hope. I think God had to grow me before he could grow the church. And I was still 25 when we started out, so it's not like I was much more mature than that 22-year-old that failed a couple of years before. I remember when our income was \$2000 a month. We were renting the D.C. public school where we met for \$1600. That left \$400 for our salary and all other expenses. We were not self-supporting until our third year. I want to speak encouragement to those who are on the very front edge of starting business as mission or planting a church. You're going to overestimate what you can do in a year or two, but you're going to underestimate what God can do in 10 or 20.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, people ask me lots and lots of times, how'd you guys grow so fast? And I'm like, "well, we were the fifteen-year overnight success." There's a lot that went on way before the growth that had to happen first. The growth in me, the laying the groundwork. I think too often, everybody's got entrepreneurial fever right now, whether they're starting companies or ministries or churches. And all you read about is the guys who have done so well. I'm hearing about five keys to success and the four things to... But the truth is, it's just hard work, man. I went to bed depressed some nights like, "Is this really going to happen?" Did you have any of that?

Mark Batterson:

It will beat you up and spit you out. You know what's interesting though? I would say that the last two years for us have been the hardest. I heard someone say that 65% of pastors quit after a building project, and then I've heard numbers that are even higher than that.

William Vanderbloemen:

I believe that.

Mark Batterson:

But it made no sense to me until we went through a building project. You walk through a capital campaign, and again, the cost of doing ministry here is not cheap. Phase one and two; we're not even to phase three, and we'll be \$45 million in. That's a...

William Vanderbloemen:

That's a big number.

Mark Batterson:

It's a big number, and I'll tell you this, the \$2000 a month is what keeps you grounded. But there have been moments where I have felt like you have the bench press bar, and there's just too much weight. You can't get it back up, and you're either going to have to tilt the weights or slide it down your body. I am leading with a little bit of a limp.

William Vanderbloemen:

Tell me about that.

Mark Batterson:

Well, there's just an emotional tax that you pay, and it's so hard to guard your heart. People will always question your motives, and you have to be really good at not taking offense. In light of the book Double Blessing, listen, the blessings of God will complicate your life. But it will complicate your life in a way that it should be complicated. When Laura and I got married, complicated my life. Well, praise God for complications. We have three complications named Parker, Summer, and Josiah. I can't imagine my life without those complications. Multi-site, complicated. The longer you lead, and the more God blesses and grows something, the more complicated... I wish it got easier. It does not.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, that's powerful word for somebody out there, I'm sure. When you talk about the building campaign itself... Everybody says, "I'm so tired of loading in and out of a school. If we could only have a building." Tell us what was difficult about that transition into building campaign, capital campaign. Walk us through, what should guys that are going to be facing that expect?

Mark Batterson:

Well, Charles Spurgeon, who of course was part of building out Metropolitan Tabernacle, which at the time, in London, it was the largest church in the world. Did you know he said that every time that there was kind of a new chapter of blessing or a new season of God amplifying his influence, that it was always preceded by a season of depression. Now, they didn't have the DSM-V back then, so I don't know if it's clinical depression. I don't know how you gauge that.

William Vanderbloemen:

You just call it melancholy.

Mark Batterson:

Yes, melancholy, and let's just say that I've experienced a little melancholy at times over the last year. You know what it is, William? I'll liken it to standing at the base of Half Dome, like I did a few years ago in Yosemite, and wondering to myself, how am I going to get to the top of that thing by the end of today? It's overwhelming. So I think there were just moments where, if you have a God-sized vision, there should be moments that it just drops you to your knees. And God, I can't do this. And that's the whole point; you can't do it. Jesus didn't say, "I will build your church." He didn't say, "You will build my church." He said, "I will build my church." Somehow, we've got to keep taking some of that pressure off of ourselves because I don't think we were meant to carry it.

William Vanderbloemen:

We talk about succession a lot. We've written a book on it; we do a whole lot of work with a lot of... In fact, your home church. We're just finishing up a little succession and pastor-search there. For the longest time, I would say, "Well, retirement is not in the Bible." It's usually when I was trying to harass people into volunteering when I was a pastor. There's no retirement in the Bible. You can still... Well, there is. I didn't see it for the longest time, but retirement's in the Bible. It's prescribed; it's mandated for the priests.

Mark Batterson:

It is.

William Vanderbloemen:

And I don't want to go all super spiritual. I've told this story a bunch of times, but... Talk about load in, load out to a school. I got to wonder what it was like to be out in the desert with the tabernacle. That's the worst load in, load out crew ever, right?

Mark Batterson:

No kidding.

William Vanderbloemen:

You put the tent picks here, and you put the this there, and the that... It's all just... right? I've just got to think, you're sitting there as priests, and the cloud of the Lord moves, and you're like, "Are you kidding me? We just got set up." So why do they talk about retirement? My read of retirement is that God said... There comes a time, talking about those guys in that load in, load out crew, comes a time when carrying the things of God is just too heavy for a guy. And I think that still plays.

Mark Batterson:

I think it does.

William Vanderbloemen:

I don't know many people who've had the blessing to build a church who would say, "Yeah, I'd go do it again." I don't see serial church planters. They're very, very few. You tell me. Teach me. I've heard that building campaigns, and I've done a couple of them, but that really big ones bring out the very best in your people and the very worst. Have you experienced that?

Mark Batterson:

I think that's true. I think it's true. I've been absolutely, nearly fainted at some of the moments and gestures of generosity. In fact, I've almost been tempted to say, "Are you sure?" You're just overwhelmed by people making sacrifices and investing in a way that you would have never imagined. And then there are always those that you know are capable of doing more. It's so hard with leadership because I can't just put my standard on other people.

Mark Batterson:

I just have to make sure that my wife and I, that we're leading the way when it comes to generosity. And that is one of our four family values, and our goal at the end of the day, this is no secret, is to reverse tithe, to live off of 10%, to give 90%. And you know how you get there? You go double tithe. And then

you go 50-50. And then at some point, if you're able, you flip the script, and you're living off of 10 and you're giving 90. Not many people get there, but I think that's a good goal to set. And I don't know anybody that goes into ministry to make a lot of money, because that's not where it's going to happen.

William Vanderbloemen:

They're either stupid or they're a criminal.

Mark Batterson:

Yes. I would just say a couple of things because we don't have time to mess around, but let's just keep it real. I put a ceiling on my salary because I don't need to make more than I do. And part of it is that I've got a stream of income that comes from books, which to me, the double blessing is I get to write and impact people, but guess what. Those royalties? Not much of it comes to me at this point because I want to flip that blessing and bless others.

William Vanderbloemen:

Let me interrupt to just ask a probing question. So you put a cap on your salary. Is the rest of your staff's salary derived from your salary? Lot of times, senior pastor's the top salary, and the next guy down makes 10% less or 15%, whatever the number. So are you lower on the payroll than others in that way? Put it this way: How will you manage, when you're reaching 10,000 people a week and you've got to hire a CFO or whatever the thing is, and to get them you're going to have to pay more than... Have y'all had to face that yet?

Mark Batterson:

We're not quite there yet, but I would say this, that at some point, I would anticipate volunteering. Now, there might be an unintended consequences with that that I haven't fully thought through, but wow, we're venturing into some things that... I hope people can kind of hear my heart through the podcast, as opposed to just hearing the letter of the law. But we have to be so careful. When a book comes out, my wife and I gift a copy personally to everybody in the church. And we do that, one, because we can, at this point. But another reason is I just... We don't use this phrase as much as we should, and it can turn into legalism. But listen, we got to be above reproach, and I think part of it, operating in integrity, is making sure that we're leading the way in generosity.

William Vanderbloemen:

And pastor's not making money selling me a book, and that sort of thing.

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, and I'm not trying to step on anybody's toes. Oswald Chambers said, "Let God be as original with others as he was with you." I don't try to impose some of my issues of conscience on other people because they're personal things. But I think if we don't talk about it, then we aren't doing anybody any favors. So maybe there's one or two or three things in there that kind of set the table because I believe God does want to bless and bless us beyond our ability to contain it. So the way I think about it is, God doesn't bless us to raise our standard of living; he blesses us to raise our standard of giving.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's good. That's good. Well, that's the first blessing you hear of anything material is with Abram, and then you turn around to hear he's blessed to be a blessing. It's not a Dead Sea where it all flows in and nothing flows out.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, so let's jump forward a little bit. You're two, three, four years in, maybe you hit that five year mark. Did you still have nights where you're like, "I tried to plant one time, and it didn't work, and this might not work out"?

Mark Batterson:

Yep.

William Vanderbloemen:

How do you get rid of that? When does that stop?

Mark Batterson:

I don't know that you ever reach a point where you don't second guess. And I'll say this, I preach for free. I don't get paid to preach. I think I get paid to make two or three decisions that no one else wants to make. I think leadership is those really tough decisions that you kind of wish someone else was making. So I don't think you ever get past second guessing. And I would even add that I think my self-confidence would be lower than average. In fact, I would say without the help of the Holy Spirit, I think I am below average. Writing, for example. Not a natural gifting.

William Vanderbloemen:

Is that right?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, in seminary, I took this aptitude assessment. Low aptitude for writing. In other words, whatever you do, don't write books.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's funny.

Mark Batterson:

But thank God that God doesn't call the qualified, he qualifies the called. Writing for me is a calling, so I take my shoes off, sit down at a keyboard, and I worship God with 26 letters of the English alphabet. I can't even remember where I was going with this, William, but I think God loves using us at a point of giftedness but also loves using us at a point of weakness because then you aren't tempted to take credit for it when God does it.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, I know that for me, somebody was starting a small consulting business that's going to be a big consulting business one day. Said to me, "When do you quit wondering if it's all going to fall apart?" And I haven't gotten there yet. I haven't gotten there yet.

William Vanderbloemen:

Every July and August, pastors go on vacation that time of year, and people scatter for their own vacations, so the phone doesn't ring quite as much. My staff has kind of a standing rule that no one is allowed to take William near a tall building during August. It's over, this is it, it's all done. But I don't know that I've gotten where I can get rid of that. And maybe it's just a part of the burden of being a founder builder is it never goes away.

Mark Batterson:

I think there's some truth to that. I do make a distinction between self-confidence and holy confidence. To me, self-confidence is kind of trusting in my own gifts and abilities. I think I'm lower on the chart with that. But my holy confidence is off the chart, and I'll tell you why. When you do a prayer circle, 4.7 miles in 1996, and 20 years later, you own half a dozen properties worth about \$55 million right on the prayer circle. There's no other explanation other than, look at what the Lord has done. Faith really is a function of faithfulness. It's just looking back, look at what God has done. At NCC, we call it so far, so God. And then the best is yet to come, so we can't live kind of in the middle of those two things. So my holy confidence: off the chart; my self-confidence: rather low.

William Vanderbloemen:

Let me ask you a question about your current team of... I was talking to a good friend of mine who planted a church, and it's grown to probably 3000 or something. It's a good-sized church, right? And he said there was an opportunity to go buy some land, and they don't really have the money for it. But it's a God thing, clearly, and he's like, "God wants us to go do this." And he's like, "Let's go do it." And his staff, who has not been there since day one, is like, "This is too risky." And he's like, "They don't even know what risk is. I slept in the church with my family the first two years." So how do you, with people who are newer to your team, that only know the days of plenty, how do you teach them to trust in the so far, so God? What do you do?

Mark Batterson:

I think part of it is that I see myself as the chief storyteller. So I tell stories all the time of a crack house that we circled for five years. Four people offered more money for it than we did, two of them real estate developers. But that crack house is now Ebenezer's Coffeehouse, been voted number one coffeehouse in D.C. Kind of fun: Southern Living just put it on one of its lists. I don't even know how you land on this stuff, but then every penny of profit, we give away. So Ebenezer's is this wonderful story that no one can argue with the testimony. So I feel like my job is to just tell testimonies of, look at what the Lord has done. And let's be honest: any risk we take now pales in comparison to buying a crack house that wasn't even zoned commercial. What were we thinking? So we had to go in before the zoning board and believe for God's favor, so I just think you keep telling those old stories, and you keep telling your team, "We haven't made enough mistakes lately." It's not easy.

William Vanderbloemen:

But it's kind of like you celebrate the Passover to remember, right?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

Tell me about Ebenezer. That's a cool story. There's so many stories we could tell, but people need to hear that, that in the middle of you planting this church... And this is before everybody wanted to have a coffeehouse. Walk us through the cradle of that story.

Mark Batterson:

Well, and why would a church build a coffeehouse before it would even build a church? I'll tell you why: because Jesus didn't just hang out in the synagogue; he hung out at wells. Wells were natural gathering places in ancient culture. Coffeehouses are postmodern wells. So what we wanted to do was create a place where church and community can cross paths. And instead of drawing water from a well, we serve coffee. One of my favorite formulas, William, is the Holy Spirit plus caffeine equals awesome. And my office is right above that coffeehouse, so it is...

Mark Batterson:

One of our core convictions is the church belongs in the middle of the marketplace. So we thought turning a crack house into a coffee house, and now we're about to embark on an entire city block that is so far past our pay grade. But we believe that it's a prototype for the urban church. Who knows how long we will have our tax status? Well, maybe we could be a little bit more creative and find ways to, one, meet needs in our community, but also revenue stream it and also use it as a way to bless the community. So our child development center is a great example of that. We're going to have 20,000 square feet of kids ministry space. Well, what are we going to do with it Monday to Friday?

William Vanderbloemen:

Let's park there for a little bit. Tell us about this. This is a great vision for what God can do, and it's not just going to happen here, right? So tell us the story.

Mark Batterson:

Well, we have a mutual friend that we admire, Frank Bealer and Reggie Joiner, the whole orange crew. And they saw an opportunity with child development centers. There are more and more two-income families. Well, those two-income families, you want to make sure that your kids, your toddlers, are in an environment that's not only safe, but that I think is growing them. So they saw this opportunity and have opened one in Alpharetta. And I think we're going to be the first kind of partner with the space that they don't own, but they're going to come in and operate that child development center.

Mark Batterson:

So here's the amazing thing: It's one of the mayor's top initiatives here in D.C. There are 7,700 child care spots for 22,000 kids under the age of three in the District of Columbia. That means one out of three kids have a spot. So here we are, bringing a 200-kids child development center into play. Well, the mayor loves us, and we're meeting a real need in real time, and we're outreaching to the community in a way that's not just a weekend service. That, to me, sounds like a win-win, and it will net profit. And it will net profit in a way that it will pay for itself in seven, eight, 10 years.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's amazing, and that's going to franchise out, I think, into other pockets of the country over time. The whole mixed-use phenomenon is not just for residential and work. What is it, work, live, play, is what everybody talks about?

Mark Batterson:

Yes.

William Vanderbloemen:

You've got a fourth thing, right?

Mark Batterson:

Yes. Work, eat, play, and pray.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's awesome.

Mark Batterson:

So even our phase one, which is where we gather in worship on the weekend, we've branded it as an event venue. So concerts, conferences, corporate events, will use this space during the week, and it gives us a chance to show hospitality and to love on our community. And those people that walk in, I think we have a better chance of them coming back for a weekend gathering.

William Vanderbloemen:

As you look out into the future, do you feel like... It feels to me, when I think about our company, I think we've launched about four companies. It's all one company from the outside looking in, but yeah, that's when we decided to re-up and do this. That's when we decided to re-up and take another step this way. Does it feel like you're having to re-plant a new version of the church every time you go through a phase? Does that make sense?

Mark Batterson:

It does, and each one is bigger and harder, and the risks are much greater because it does... There are churches doing wonderful, creative things that build a community center, for example, instead of just a church building. And understand that our vision is not just to build a church, but to bless a city and to do something that will make a difference 70 years from now. So that's kind of our mindset, and then it's coupled with this conviction that there are ways of doing church that no one's thought of yet. So if we get this right, well, now, just like Ebenezer's, which has given millions of dollars to kingdom causes from net profits, well, times that by 10. We have the opportunity with this city block, through a mixed-use market place, coworking space, in addition to the things we're already talking about... We have an opportunity to fund some kingdom ventures.

Mark Batterson:

Can I even throw this in there, that for every church we plant, I had this hunch that we had to start a business. I'll tell you why. This was a huge financial undertaking. Two years ago, we got a \$14 million gift. Can I tell you who that came from? Not their name. From an entrepreneur, from someone who started a business and God blessed it. But they have a heart for the kingdom.

William Vanderbloemen:

And a heart for an entrepreneurial version of the kingdom, probably.

Mark Batterson:

Yes. In fact, they said, "You have vision beyond your resources." So they looked for that same kind of entrepreneurial edge. So I'm more and more convinced, even missions... So we've taken, I think, 272 mission trips. It's our life blood. We love to give to missions-

William Vanderbloemen:

How many years has the church been around?

Mark Batterson:

Well, that's in the last 17 years that we've done 272 trips-

William Vanderbloemen:

17 goes into 272 more than one time a year.

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, it does. So I think this year, we'll probably take 32, 36 trips. And we've built partnerships. We've gone back eight, 10 times to some of the same places, as well as new ventures.

Mark Batterson:

But what we're realizing is that the old model of missionaries maybe raising support from 150 churches... Is that the very best model for getting a missionary to the field? I'm not sure it is. And more and more, there are countries you can't even get into if you aren't going in as a business venture. I'll give one example. We have dear friends, Tony and Jamie Sebastian started I Heart Café, first in Greece but now in Cypress. Well, they're an amazing couple that just... They do business really well, and they love Jesus. So we've got to think outside the box and go in with some ways that maybe add value on the business front but also allow us to then have relationship, which is where this thing starts. So we are doing a lot of re-thinking, a lot of re-learning, and I don't think you ever figure it out. It's kind of like parenting, right? You never figure it out. You figure out how to change a diaper, and they're toddlers. You figure out toddlers, they're teenagers.

William Vanderbloemen:

I've said entrepreneurialism, starting a company, starting a church, starting anything. Parenting is a lot of similarities, and one is, I really think, parenting, God just kind of puts you on a need-to-know basis. If you knew everything you were getting into when you started, you might not do it. Same with starting a church; same with starting a business. It starts off simple. Okay, fine, I'll get up and feed the baby. But then, one more complexity after another. It just keeps going. Tell me how your family has dealt with all the sacrifice you've made for the church. What can families learn from your story? I don't know a bigger stresser to a marriage than starting a church, no context, no nothing.

Mark Batterson:

Fortunately, in a sense, we started when my oldest son was just a baby, a couple months old. You can't get something off the ground without making some sacrifices, but then eventually, I began putting some boundaries in place. I'll give the church one night a week. I've learned some lessons the hard way. When your wife says to you, "This isn't what I signed up for," it's a reality check. And there was a point where I was pastoring churches, kind of blowing and going, writing books. And when you write a book, people think you know more than you really do, and they invite you to come speak at things, and I was naïve enough to think that every opportunity was the right opportunity.

Mark Batterson:

So I got all out of whack, and a couple of things I did: one is I put some boundaries in place. I won't do more than 12 overnight speaking trips a year. And during this building phase, it's six. So I have totally dialed back. I also know that most of my influence is writing. Writing, I can influence hundreds of thousands or millions of people. And listen, I love preaching to thousands of people, but I know that at some point, this pastor-author became an author-pastor. So I've got to know where is my unique influence.

Mark Batterson:

And then I would even push that envelope further and say, listen, this church can find another pastor. And of course, I'm talking to someone who is the very best at finding other pastors for churches. So this church can find another pastor; my kids can't find another dad. My wife can't find another husband. So I've really lived by this mantra for probably the past decade: I want to be famous in my home, and you can't be famous in your home if you're never home. So you've got to define success for yourself, and I have a simple definition, William. It's when those who know me best respect me most. That's my wife; that's my kids.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's so good. If you were going back... I'd love to talk about a couple things as we move toward the end of our time together, I'd love to think backward. If you were able to visit that young version of you who knew everything, what advice would you give him? What's the hey, man, let me save you a little stupid, text? Here's what I know now that you need to know.

Mark Batterson:

Ironically, I would advise myself to make some of the same mistakes.

William Vanderbloemen:

Like what?

Mark Batterson:

Just not make them over and over again.

William Vanderbloemen:

Give me an example.

Mark Batterson:

I'll give you a fun example. We did a major marketing campaign three months into the church plant. Basically, we spent a ton of money to get as many people there as possible to see how poorly we did church to ensure that they would never come back. Seriously, we were putting the cart before the horse. We didn't have much to offer, so you make silly mistakes like that.

Mark Batterson:

But I think the big thing I would say is, well, one, Long Obedience is in the Same Direction, which Eugene Peterson kind of popularized that idea. But I believe it, and I had a father-in-law that planted and pastored for 31 years, so I had a good mentor and model for that. I think the other thing I would say today is, enjoy the journey. I fell into the trap that the grass is greener when you hit 100 people or 500 people or 1000 people. Don't fool yourself. If you weren't enjoying it right here, right now, you never will. It is a mirage to think that there's going to be this moment where you're going to have a certain number of accolades or sell a certain number of books or have a certain number of people in the pew. No, no, no, no, no.

William Vanderbloemen:

I have a friend who says, "Those goal posts just keep moving. I can't get to the end zone."

Mark Batterson:

They do. So you got to live for the applause of nail-scarred hands. You have to. You've got to do it for intrinsic reasons, not those extrinsic reasons like fame or fortune or 15 minutes of fame.

William Vanderbloemen:

Super advice. I wish I had heard that at 31, when I took a big church. But as I think forward and, segueing with goal posts, I said it years ago by accident, and it's kind of become a by-line that I've said it a million times. Every pastor's an interim pastor.

Mark Batterson:

Thank you, wow.

William Vanderbloemen:

You get three ways to end your ministry here. If you know a fourth, you tell me. You can run the church into the ground and close it. That's one ending, not cool. You could be the pastor that happens to be pastor the day Jesus returns. Super cool, right?

Mark Batterson:

Wouldn't that be amazing?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, hard to get on the calendar though, right?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, while preaching on Sunday.

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William Vanderbloemen:

Right, maybe before preaching on Sunday. But probably not going to happen. The third option is somebody's going to come after you. So what do you think about, you've got a long runway left, and we've had conversations. This is your life call, right?

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, it is.

William Vanderbloemen:

But your life's going to be over one day, so what are you... Are you thinking about that? How are you approaching this thing that you've built, which is probably like a fourth child?

Mark Batterson:

Wow, you nailed it.

William Vanderbloemen:

Is that right?

Mark Batterson:

I sometimes refer to it as a fourth child, and I don't even know if I should.

William Vanderbloemen:

I don't know that that's unhealthy.

Mark Batterson:

I don't even know what to think about that, but...

William Vanderbloemen:

I'm guessing the only person that cares more about this church than you is Jesus.

Mark Batterson:

You might be right.

William Vanderbloemen:

Sorry for everybody else listening out there.

Mark Batterson:

For both my wife and I, it does feel like we gave birth to it. And there is something unique with that.

William Vanderbloemen:

So when the wedding day comes, and you got to give away this fourth child-

Mark Batterson:

Walk it down the aisle...

William Vanderbloemen:

Have you thought about that or what-

Mark Batterson:

I have. I have thought a lot about it.

William Vanderbloemen:

Tell me what you're thinking about it.

Mark Batterson:

It's funny because it brings up back to something you referenced that, I'm shocked at how few pastors actually know that the Old Testament priests would hang up their cleats at 50. Now, let's be fair, life spans were shorter. So I don't think you can use 50 as the bench mark, but you and I both know, there are far more pastors who are playing the same role too long than those who are really handing off well in a way that allows them to cheer others on.

William Vanderbloemen:

It's become an outdated metaphor, but I call it Brett Favre syndrome. I got another season, man, I can do it.

Mark Batterson:

Although, I still think he could come back.

William Vanderbloemen:

I only think that because he's close to my age.

Mark Batterson:

That's another conversation for another day.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's right. So what are you thinking about, then? As you're thinking, "How do I make this a good handoff?" And it's a long way off. Nobody at church listening get worried; there's no news. But what's going through your head?

Mark Batterson:

Well, I think, one, it's important to have the right mindset. So again, this is an issue of conscious for me, that I don't want to pin on anybody else, but I never use a personal pronoun when I talk about National Community Church. You would never hear me saying, "my church." Now, listen, I love it when our people call it, "my church." I want them to use the personal pro- But I'm an under-shepherd.

Mark Batterson:

And the other story that I reference all the time because he's really one of my heroes, Peter Marshall pastored New York Advent Presbyterian Church and, of course, was senate chaplain. There was a season where he had to take a time out from ministry just because of the physical tax, and he was on the sideline for a while, and when he came back, someone asked him what he learned. And he said this: "The kingdom of God goes on without Peter Marshall." It's true for each of us.

Mark Batterson:

So I think I want to give my heart and soul to this thing, but I want to do it in a way where someday I can be a spiritual father to someone and cheer them on, and not too much of my ego is tied to the title I hold or the position that I hold. It's so hard. It's hard to check our ego at the door, and it's hard to find our identity only in Christ, as children of God. But someday, the office is going to belong to someone else.

William Vanderbloemen:

John Maxwell told me years and years ago, I said, "What do I do as a young leader?" I was a pastor at the time, and he was kind to take time with me. He said, "You know, William, smart young leaders spend their early years creating options for their later years." And I think about that with succession. I don't know I'm going to do with our company, but I'm going to create options where there's not just... I'm not pinned in a corner; I got to hang on. Whether that's you creating your financial security so that you don't have to keep working if you don't... I think that's what I'm trying to learn, is how do I create those options? Because if it's like parenting, this is starting a church, starting a business. I think, the best definition of parenting, I've heard from a counselor that I saw many years ago, is parenting is a daily learning in the lesson of letting go.

Mark Batterson:

Yeah, spot on.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, this is so good. I could go on for hours and hours, but man, I'm sitting in the very first recording ever in this space. So let all archivists record that. And I can't wait to come back in a year and see phase two, and two years and see phase three, and just see what God does with this huge vision that he's put on you. Really appreciate you making time, man.

Mark Batterson:

Hey, what a joy, and can I share a final word of encouragement?

William Vanderbloemen:

Absolutely, yes.

Mark Batterson:

I'm leading with a little bit of a limp because the last couple of years have been so hard, but I would say this: I don't trust leaders who don't limp because I think you might be faking it. You do this long enough, and you'll have some scars to show for it.

Mark Batterson:

But I just pray, keep your hearts soft, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, keep casting those crowns at the throne of God, and if you stay humble and stay hungry, nothing that God can't do in you or through you. So if you're limping a little bit right now, I think maybe this is a word from the Lord for you that that limp, just like Jacob, yes, it's a reminder of an injury. But remember that story. It's also a reminder that he fought all night to secure a blessing. So to me, the limp then becomes a reminder. I'm limping, but I'm blessed.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's good. That's so good. Well, appreciate you making time, and I don't think listeners understand what a sacrifice, that all the people that come on this are so busy, and to take an hour of time and sit down and be vulnerable. It means so much, and I'm just sure it's going to bless some people out there.

William Vanderbloemen:

And if you're out there listening and you want to catch links to Mark's latest books and any way to get in touch with him, we're going to have show notes, and Holly will direct you to that. I think if you go to vanderblast.com, you'll get the mail list that won't beat you up all day with other stuff. But we'll send you podcast information. Thanks for what you're doing for the kingdom, man. You're on the front lines; I'm in the cheap seats. I get to watch what's going on, and you're just killing it out here. Thank you.

Mark Batterson:

Well, thank you. Joy.

Holly Tate:

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