

Holly Tate:

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast. I'm your host, Holly Tate, vice president of business development here at Vanderbloemen. In today's episode, I interview William Vanderbloemen, our founder and CEO. William and I discuss his new book *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*, the expanded and updated edition that came out in April of 2020, right in the middle of quarantine. We talk about what succession really is, why it's important and what the future of succession post pandemic looks like. William's book and this conversation provide insight into navigating leadership changes with wisdom and grace. Our team here at Vanderbloemen has conducted hundreds of pastoral transitions, which is why this topic of succession is so important to us.

Holly Tate:

We've seen ministries crumble under a lack of succession plan, and we've seen ministries thrive for years and years after a transition because they were intentional about planning for succession. I know you'll learn a lot from William's insight today on this critical leadership topic. So tweet your takeaways from today's show using the hashtag Vander cast, and check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group where we post behind the scenes content. You'll even see a video of me and William behind the scenes in that Facebook group. So without further ado, here's my conversation with William Vanderbloemen.

Holly Tate:

So William, back in 2015, you wrote a book with Warren Bird called *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*, and fast forward six years and a global pandemic later, you came out with the updated and expanded edition of *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*. So my first question is, what is succession and why are we talking about it? Why have you spent literally years thinking about succession?

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, it's funny, succession used to be a four letter word in the church, and it's not anymore. And that was really the only reason we wrote the first book. And you said, "What do you mean?" Well, I mean, churches don't treat pastors like an employee of a company. Maybe some pastors feel that way and maybe they are treated that way. But most of the time pastors and congregants are closer to a family relationship than they are an employer, employee relationship. And so if an employee, particularly a CEO of a company, sits down with their board and says, "Let's talk about when I'm not here anymore." They get major props. It's like, "Wow. This is the biggest leadership challenge you'll ever face. Somebody's going to come after you. Way to go." If a dad sits down at the dinner table and says, "let's talk about when I'm not here anymore." Not good.

William Vanderbloemen:

The kids think he's sick and dying. The mother thinks he's running off with somebody, it's just not good. Now that's a little bit of a high drama way of framing things, but it's not too far from where people were with pastoral succession. There's an old saying in the Catholic church, "The only sick Pope is a dead Pope." And there are some people who really hold to that. And we're not going to talk about whether he's sick or not. If he's dead, he's dead, but if he's alive, we're all good to go. Interesting, since we wrote that first book, we've actually had a Pope retire, and another Pope succeed. So even at the highest levels of the church, this is no longer a taboo word. Our book, I hope, has played some small part in making this a normal conversation.

William Vanderbloemen:

Because if you think about it, either you're going to run your church in the ground, it's going to close. Or you're going to be pastor when Jesus returns, kind of hard to calendar. Or someone's coming after you. So pastoral succession is really talking about the handoff from one pastor's tenure to another. Now I say that carefully Holly, because it's not one pastor figuring out what they do after their pastor, right? That's a piece of the puzzle. But what am I going to do with my life once I retire? That's a part of succession. It's not even a search for a new pastor. Well, we need to find a new pastor, so we're in succession. No, that's a search for a new pastor. Succession's a much more holistic look at the body itself. Like what has God done through this pastor? And what would he do through the next woman or man that's being called to pastor?

William Vanderbloemen:

What has he done through the board during that time? And how does the board need to prepare itself for the next chapter? What's happened to our donor base? What about multi-site? What about programming? What about the rest of the staff? They're just a lot of pieces to a puzzle about the whole ecosystem of the church and how it will shift when a new pastor is called. So it's been a long time since we first wrote that book, but I'm feeling like, instead of saying, "The only sick pastor is a dead pastor." Now I'm getting invited to speak at things. Before the pandemic in 2020, I spent the whole year running around the country, going to small groups of senior pastors that would never have talked about this, that were talking about it openly and publicly, and then getting to oversee some of the great succession plans and transitions in the church that we've seen in the last decade. There's a lot more to come. The conversation is going to grow more. And it's funny Holly, when you write a book on something, I've found that people actually ask you to consult on that something.

Holly Tate:

Yes.

William Vanderbloemen:

As soon as we wrote the book on succession planning, Next, people called and said, "Would you come do our succession plan?" And we'd been doing some of that, but in the six years since then, we've really refined things, and we've learned a lot. And that's why we released this new book with a whole lot more understanding of what's going on in the latest trends, what the latest thinking is, and how churches can get ready. It's an issue that will forever be a church issue, but over the next 10 years, it is the issue churches will have to wrestle with. And there are a lot of reasons for that.

Holly Tate:

Well, let's unpack that. What are the reasons for... I mean, that was a big statement that you just said, "It will be the issue that organizations have to face in the next 10 years." Why?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. It's a big issue to say anything other than COVID is the issue, right? Who says that. I've drawn it before on graphs and charts, but if you imagine how many workers are available by age group, there are a whole lot of baby boomers still retiring. And then there are people my age, 35 to 55, and there just not many of those, and there a whole lot of millennials. So you got a whole lot of baby boomers, not as many my age, and then a whole lot of millennials. And so the question then becomes, if you've been at your church 20, 30 years, however long, and you're about to hand it off, do you really feel comfortable

handing that off to a 30 year old? Or would you rather have somebody who's got a little more experience where there are fewer of those?

William Vanderbloemen:

So it's a crisis. There not enough workers to naturally step in. And so either you're going to have to develop a pipeline that allows for a higher risk with a less experienced person, or you're going to have to develop a bench early, or you're going to have to do a search that finds this person. But anyway you cut it, just from a supply and demand by birth rate, until this generation is fully retired, it's going to be a huge issue. Now in 10 years, they'll all have been retired, there'll be very few people headed toward retirement and a whole lot of people right behind them. And it won't be nearly the crunch that it is right now. I also think it'll be a more normal conversation and a much more natural part of church life. But for the next 10 years, this is the big issue.

Holly Tate:

Well, and it's interesting that you're saying 10 years, because I think back just six years when you wrote the first edition, and we think about now in 2020, put the pandemic aside, a lot of the case studies, or few, maybe I shouldn't say a lot because there were over 200 case studies in the first edition, and I know there's even more in the new edition, but a handful of the case studies, those pastors are no longer at the helm of that church that you and Warren featured, or the church no longer exists. So tell me more about that. I mean, that's only six years and you're talking about another 10 years.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, and there are a few things that have happened. When we first started getting calls for succession planning, it was, "Pastor just turned 85, and he's in his last 10 years, so we need to..." No seriously, people would call when it was really late. And it was like, "We got to get something done now." Now we're getting calls from pastors that, "I just turned 55. I really do have 10 years left, maybe 15, what do we need to be doing now?" So you have much more latitude to get things done. And most of the big leaders that have to get pulled in succession are long-term decisions. It's the old cardinal rule of negotiation, the person with the most time wins. And so what I'm seeing happen is, pastors are now saying, "I need more time to get this done."

William Vanderbloemen:

And I'm also seeing pastors realize that there may not be as much time as I thought. Some of the people you mentioned or that I would imagine you had mentioned by name, if you were talking about who was a pastor and who isn't now, are not older people. Life happens, an illness happens, a train wreck happens, a pastor loses their church, a pastor commits a moral red card and loses their church. So there are lots of unforeseen departures of pastors. And I think churches are realizing now it's not just a retirement conversation, it's a readiness conversation. And having a plan to be ready in the event of something really unforeseen, is well worth doing. And I think we'll see that more and more as we see younger generations come along, that don't just change jobs, they change careers. So as a person goes into ministry, it may not be ministry for life. And that's okay. But what does the church do when they lose their pastor because he wants to become a banker or an oil guy or a search consultant?

Holly Tate:

Yes. [crosstalk 00:10:14]. Well, that sentence that you said, "It's no longer a retirement conversation, it's a readiness conversation." And I think we've seen that more than ever right now when we're recording

this, which is in the middle of COVID-19. So talk to me about... Because a lot of the contracts that we've had come in during this time are senior pastor searches. So what do you think has risen to the top during this time where we face challenges that we've never faced before as churches or ministries? Why does there feel like, "Okay now there is an urgency we've been without this pastor for a year and now we really need to find one." Why is that?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. Well, so it's such a weird time and who would've thought we'd be at a time where unprecedented would be a worn out word? But it is.

Holly Tate:

Right. It is.

William Vanderbloemen:

If I could go another decade without hearing, unprecedented, pivot, and I'm hearing three or four others that I was like, "Come on. Please." But it really is uncharted water. And I think what that does is, it reminds people how fleeting life is. The book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon says "Vanity Vanity, all is vanity." And I didn't know it until I was studying in seminary, we had to take Hebrew, and the word for vanity there is [foreign language 00:11:36], right? So a lot of people probably know this, but that's the same word for the name of the boy Abel, who was-

Holly Tate:

I didn't know that.

William Vanderbloemen:

Gone in a wisp. Cain and Abel. Abel did the right thing, he's gone. And there's just a sense in which a crisis like COVID, I think, has made people realize that we really are in a vanity of vanities. Everything is wisp of air. Everything can be gone just like that. And churches have to have a readiness plan like never before. I also think that the COVID era has given us at least a time, hopefully it's a time that we're seeing the end of, where we cannot gather together. And God says in the Bible, the very first thing he didn't like, the very first thing he curses, "It is not good for people to be left alone." And so this apartness, I think has made churches say, "We need a shepherd. We know Jesus is the good shepherd, but churches need a shepherd." So whether it's a church, that's like, "Our pastor might not be here forever, and we need to get used to that." Or it's a church that thought they were getting by without a pastor, but they're realizing this is an emergency time, we really need somebody.

William Vanderbloemen:

I think there's a heightened awareness. And it's a heightened awareness of the need of a pastor, and the temporary nature of their stay. Growing up my church, I didn't realize it at the time, but we were like a really great minor league baseball club team. The pastor that was there when we first moved to town, left town and went to the great big [Presbyterian 00:13:09] church in San Antonio. Pastor before him had left to be the president of one of our seminaries. While the pastor after him left to be a head of a great big publication. The pastor after him left to be a pastor of great big Presbyterian church in Baton Rouge. And we were just this little church in [Podunk 00:13:27] Mountains in North Carolina.

William Vanderbloemen:

And we were used to people coming and going. But I think somewhere in our mind we've gotten lodged in our head the idea that ministry isn't successful if you don't do it for 30 years in the same place in the same time. And it's kind of funny, because you think about our friends that are multi-site churches and they say, "One church, many locations." It's actually one kingdom, many locations. And God just deploys people at different days and times. So I think one thing COVID has sort of dislodged for me, is a sense of permanence. Anything you thought was permanent is not. Except for maybe stock in Clorox bleach. That's about the only thing that's going to be permanently a good idea.

Holly Tate:

Yes.

William Vanderbloemen:

So the idea that permanence is not here, is actually a really healthy one. It'll keep our mind fixed on heaven. It'll keep our churches in a state of readiness for the next pastor. And I think overall it'll help the succession conversation, but I do think Holly, that within the crisis of succession, you're going to see an acceleration of succession. I've talked to many pastors who recently did their handoff that were at a retirement age and maybe even left a little early. Who said, "Man, am I glad we got somebody younger in place because I could've done all this pivoting with COVID, but it doesn't come naturally to me. And my replacement, John, he was born with a laptop, and he knew what he was doing." And so there's a sudden need, as COVID accelerated the need for technology, the pastoral skill set that's needed has accelerated into a digital age, and it's calling for a new kind of pastor on a whole lot of fronts.

Holly Tate:

Well, tell me more about that. Let's unpack that new kind of pastor, because that's going to be critical to the succession conversation, especially if you're a board member watching this.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, yeah. So the whole idea of what kind of pastor do I look for? I think has shifted radically since the pandemic. And that's almost its own blog post or its own [crosstalk 00:00:15:36]. I think that the new gold standard for pastors is to be a local pastor. And what I mean by that is, I've got a friend here in town who's a really good pastor, and he's scared to death because his church has never done just virtual or online worship, and they've been doing it for 10 weeks and he says to me, "William, I don't know if my people are ever going to come back." And I said, "Well, why?" And he said, "Well, now they figured out they can YouTube or virtually worship anywhere. And then why would they listen to me? I'm a okay preacher, but I'm not a great preacher."

William Vanderbloemen:

So I think that the ballgame for the future is not going to be having the best data of any sermon that's out there, but having the most localized message, how is God speaking to us in our community right here, right now? And that means having people that preach with a micro contextualization. It's really an acceleration of a trend that was already here. Good communicators, particularly the millennial generation, were getting way far away from the five things you need to do to make your marriage better, and way into the let's go on a journey and talk about marriage and tell you the things I'm learning about my marriage, and we'll use God's word. But you hear the difference? Instead of directives and data. It's here's what my self-reflection is teaching me about God's word. So what does that mean?

William Vanderbloemen:

That's the most localized localization you can get. The pastor of the future will be the one who looks in the mirror first. I was listening to a sermon this morning on a run and it was talking about the Good Samaritan. And three guys came down the road, saw this guy beaten up. And the first two saw a stranger beaten up. And the pastor said, "You know what the third guy saw? He saw himself." And I thought, "Wow." The future is the pastor who's going to spend time looking in the mirror first. Where does God speak to me? And then he's going to look at his local context, and the people God's given him as a congregation. And then he's going to figure out how to deploy people into that local neighborhood.

William Vanderbloemen:

Doesn't mean you don't still send global missionaries, although that may change a little bit with international travel, but I think, in a world where everyone can access every great sermon ever, the need for somebody to speak to our local parish, to our local [inaudible 00:18:10], our zip code, to our zip code with the four numbers that come after the zip code, super micro contextualized, that's going to be a new skillset.

William Vanderbloemen:

And then of course you can go into the obvious, people are going to have to be able to speak into a camera in an empty room, as well as a full room. People are going to have to think socially, people are going to have to think about being able to do things digitally and not just in person. And they're going to have to think about their website and their online presence as a giant front porch to the church itself. So it's just going to, in my mind, create a bifurcation of who's ready and who's not. And it's not just who's techie, it's who's techie and who's super local, and who's super personable.

William Vanderbloemen:

And we've joked at the office, you and I have many times, that if we really wanted to make money, we would start a search firm that helps IT companies find team leaders because the best IT people are not always the most personable people. So where will you find a pastor who's IT savvy, but super duper personable? It's a whole new skill set. And I've been thinking and researching it quite a bit. We think it's going to create a whole new need for a kind of search for pastors because I don't know how in the world a search committee could test for these things without some sort of guide along the way.

Holly Tate:

Absolutely. So William, as we wrap up together, I want you to think to 2025, so five years from now, and your next, next, next updated and expanded edition of Next: Pastoral Succession That Works. What do you hope or what do you project will be in that book five years from now that's not in the one today?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. That's a great question, Holly. I think my hope would be the new normal is here. Like here are the standards. There's not a cookie cutter for succession. Every church is different. Every individual is different. Every situation is different. And I know that sounds like a sales pitch for us, but it's not. My one cardinal rule of succession is, if somebody says they have a cookie cutter, run away from them. There are no five easy steps. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. But I do hope that if the first book made the conversation not taboo, the second book would make the conversation more normal.

William Vanderbloemen:

So the third book would say, "Well, now that this is what everyone does, here is the textbook that we're learning in seminary before we ever get the field of ministry to say, "Okay, my big job now as a 25 year old coming out of seminary, my big job is to prepare the church for when I'm not here." Of the three years Jesus did ministry, most of that time was preparing the world for when he wasn't here. So I hope we're moving from taboo conversation, to really hot topic, to new normal of how we train pastors.

Holly Tate:

That's great. Well, my biggest takeaway today that I'd love to encourage pastors or board members, or even if you're the CEO of a Christian non-profit or ministry, is what you said, "That it's not a retirement conversation anymore, it's a readiness conversation." And so you can read the book, order your copy and read it at nextpastor.com. And also contact our team because William and our team walk alongside CEOs of non-profits and pastors of churches of all different shapes and sizes all over the country about the succession readiness conversation each and every day, and we'd be honored to help you. Well, William, thank you so much for your time. And I look forward to continuing to see how all of this unfolds together.

William Vanderbloemen:

Thanks Holly.

Holly Tate:

Thanks for listening to today's conversation with William Vanderbloemen. If we can help you here at Vanderbloemen with succession planning or hiring, give us a call at 713-300-9665, or email me holly@vanderbloemen.com. You can also pick up the latest copy of Next: Pastoral Succession That Works, the updated and expanded edition at nextpastor.com.