

Anna Baker:

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast. I'm your host, Anna Baker, senior marketing manager here at Vanderbloemen. I'm bringing you the third episode in our series, "What I've Learned While Starting a New Job in the Middle of a Pandemic." In this series, we're sharing the stories of senior pastors who transitioned to a new church in the middle of a pandemic. We're talking with ministry leaders who were brave enough to take a new job during 2020, the year of uncertainty. These leaders arrived at their new church home during the same year as COVID-19, when church buildings shut down, social distancing kept us apart, and there was an immediate shift to online operations.

Anna Baker:

We helped place these pastors in their roles in a year unlike any other, and we wanted to catch up with them now as we end this year to share their stories of trial, success and agility. We all pushed boundaries this year, adapting to new things, so we hope these conversations explore relatable situations and pose insightful questions to consider in the new year, as we put what we've learned from 2020 into practice.

Anna Baker:

In this episode, Tim Stevens, the Executive Pastor of Campuses at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, Illinois, shares the details surrounding his transition to Executive Pastor in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. Tim shares how God moved in his life to prepare him for a physical, vocational, and emotional transition, as well as the challenges he faced leading a new congregation and making difficult decisions virtually.

Anna Baker:

This episode offers advice and comfort for pastors as they navigate change management, specifically in a virtual setting. Tweet your takeaways from today's show using the hashtag vandercast, and check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group, where we post behind-the-scenes content. Here's William's conversation with Tim Stevens.

William:

Hey, everybody. Thanks for joining us again for another episode of ... as we record this, we're not even really sure what the title is going to be, but something like, "I Got to My Church and There Was a Pandemic." We're releasing a whole season of these at once. You've probably already heard one or two. Today, Tim Stevens, a dear friend, a former colleague and executive pastor at Willow Creek, is joining us. Tim, thanks so much for making time.

Tim Stevens:

Oh, man. Absolutely glad to be here.

William:

Yeah. I'd love to let folks hear a little bit of your story. More people know you than me, for sure, but there's probably somebody who doesn't know who you are or how we ended up calling each other former colleagues and the whole bit. Yeah, bring us up to speed.

Tim Stevens:

Yeah, I'd be glad to. I think our relationship went from skeptic to customer, client, to employee, back to one of those others again, except skeptic. I'm not a skeptic anymore. We can leave that behind. No, but I spent nine years in the nonprofit world, and then joined up with a church startup in Granger, Indiana, called Granger Community Church. That was back in 1994.

Tim Stevens:

I was on staff there for 20 years, and that's when I think you and I first met, was somewhere towards the latter fourth of that or so. Then joined on staff with Vanderbloemen as a search consultant and VP over the team in fall of 2014, and was there until COVID hit. Then I made a COVID decision to join the staff at Willow Creek this past April. I'm Executive Pastor at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago.

William:

That's awesome. Actually you've turned into quite a good story for us, because you did great work. For starters, everybody's like, "Oh, my gosh, what are you going to do now that Tim's gone?" Well, we cried for a long time, and we will do that, because Tim and Faith are great people to have around you in life.

William:

From a work standpoint, when we first asked you to join the team and Tim said, "Okay, I'll come," we were like, "Oh, hope this works out." In the background we were like, "Yes!" We were so excited, because I'd had the ability, through God's help and some hard work, to have a whole lot of people say help us out, but we didn't have any real systems. It was a Texas way of saying that view as a cowboy culture, like you get your search done this way.

William:

I said, "Tim, can you build quality control and scalable, repeatable systems?" Man, if you didn't do it, because not only did Tim build systems, but he found his replacement without even knowing it. He trained him, so as soon as Tim left, his successor stepped into place, and we really haven't missed a beat. We've missed you, but we haven't missed a beat. Like icing on the cake, he found a successor with the same first name. It's just Tim.

Tim Stevens:

First Timothy, Second Timothy.

William:

Yeah. It was First Timothy, Second Timothy for a long time. Second Timothy is now First Timothy and you're second, so sorry.

Tim Stevens:

That's the way it should be.

William:

It's been a great story. Even cooler to that narrative is to be able to say, "We will go the extra mile." "Well, what do you mean?" "Well, when we helped Willow Creek find their new senior pastor, not only did we help them do that, but we gave them our best team member to go run the place as exec pastor."

Tim Stevens:

Is that something you're trying to make repetitive, or is that a one-time deal?

William:

Yeah. No, it's not a scalable, repeatable system. It's a repeatable line, that's for sure. We had the pleasure of walking with them through the woods of coming out of their founding pastor and into a new pastor, and yeah. I'll never forget our COO, Sutton. I came back from one of our visits when we were up there working with the search committee and I said, "I think we're going to lose Tim to Willow." Sutton said, "Don't ever say that again. Why would you say that?" I said, "I can see something's happening." Sure enough, I think Jesus was working on you a little bit. Walk us through that.

Tim Stevens:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I didn't see it coming, for sure. I think it was January of this year, last year, of 2020, when Faith said. Faith and I were out on a walk, as you can do in Texas in January. I can't do that anymore, unfortunately. Anyway, we're out on a walk and she said, "Hey." It was a recurring, every six months, every 12 months check-in. "Any chance going back to be a pastor again?" "Absolutely not. I mean, I love serving the church. I think I'm done serving a specific church." That was January.

Tim Stevens:

February, we're going on the same walk again. I said, "God's doing something inside me related to Willow." It was a short conversation. She says, "What is it?" I said, "I don't know." I said, "I'm rarely adept at understanding my own feelings. That's what you're supposed to help me with." It was just something that God was doing inside me as I was continuing to work on the search. We were, at that point, working into our second slate of candidates. It was a sense of just like, God's got to raise up some people to help this place. I wasn't exactly sure what that meant, and then just put a pin in it in my own heart and mind.

Tim Stevens:

Then March 31st was the day that William and I were on a call with the elders at Willow. They voted unanimously to call Dave Dummitt as their senior pastor. The next morning, Dave was on the phone with me and asking me if I'd come do this with him. I remember that, that conversation. At that point, we were locked down. COVID had just reared its head. I remember getting on the phone with Sutton and then William, and just saying like, "I don't know what's going on. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this."

Tim Stevens:

You guys were just so gracious, to say, "You know what? You don't have a choice but to explore this. We need you to do it fast, because we have decisions to make at Vanderbloemen, but you need to go down this path." I so appreciated the encouragement to explore what God is doing.

William:

Well, you handled yourself so well through the whole thing. We could do a whole podcast on trying to be a sending business. You know, we talk about being a sending church. People for years have said, "We want to be a church that raises up people called to ministry," or to plant churches or to go to the mission field or wherever. Unfortunately, having been a pastor, I've actually seen it on church staffs

where you get protective of your own people, and that's my guy and I can't let them go. Then you get a really fearful culture where people are like, "I don't think I can talk to my boss about this."

William:

I just don't see that reflecting what we preach. Any chance we can get where everybody's being on the up and up, which you totally were, if we can send and bless, I just hope it provides a little bit of encouragement to pastors out there who are worried about losing their guys or their gals. By the way, it isn't even your church, much less your staff. It belongs to Jesus. Sorry for the sermon. I'll back off. I'm a recovering preacher every now and then.

Tim Stevens:

No, but I totally agree, because to me, when a pastor or a leadership team has created a culture where people can't talk about what God might be doing in them and through them and in their future, it removes the people that are closest to that person to be able to pray through it, counsel through it, talk through it, ask questions. Because it's like a scarcity mentality, of, "If we lose this person, how are we going to replace them," versus an open-handed, kingdom-minded, "Let's explore what God's doing in your heart." God will figure out our needs and we'll get there. It might be hard for a season, but we'll get there. I appreciated that about our conversations as I was leaving, coming to Willow.

William:

Well, and if you're watching today, you're watching in the early part of '21. You've probably heard me say this by now, but I'm spending the latter half, latter part of 2020, telling every leader I can tell, '21 is going to be a year of turnover. I mean, it just is. There's turnover that didn't happen in 2020 because people hung in there to get through COVID. There's, "I want to be near family. This has caused me to rethink my values." There's, "The job changed. It's not what I ... " I mean, there's a whole list and you can find content, but I think the sooner leaders can get their mind around trying to send, rather than, as you say, have a scarcity mentality, I think it'll reflect more of what Jesus wants, and probably won't come back wanting.

Tim Stevens:

Totally agree.

William:

Okay, so you get to your church. Now, you knew going in. I mean, you said yes during a lockdown. Who does that? You knew going in things were going to be different, but what has been a real challenge for you, walking into a brand-new church during COVID?

Tim Stevens:

Yeah. Yeah. There were a lot of things that were not surprising. You and I working with the elders at Willow for six to nine months prior to that, we kind of knew what was under a lot of the rocks, and Willow really wanted the next senior pastor to know, to come in with eyes wide open. We had privy to that information. We were able to communicate that to candidates, so a lot of that wasn't surprising.

Tim Stevens:

We didn't know COVID was going to happen. We didn't know there was going to be incredibly increased racial tension, that nine days after we started in the office was when George Floyd was murdered. In the City of Chicago, that was escalated, as it was, I'm sure in a lot of big cities. That was just front and center for a season. Well, it still is, in a lot of ways. A lot of challenges there.

Tim Stevens:

I would say COVID, when you're walking into an organization that has gone through a breach of trust, a scandal, where people, by nature of your position, they come in not trusting you, that was a new thing for me. I'd never joined an organization that, when I walked in, there wasn't a sense of like, "Oh, we trust you. Why? Because So-and-so said we should, also because we've seen some of what you've done in the past, also because we're Christians and we're supposed to trust our leaders," so all of that.

Tim Stevens:

Walking into a place where trust had been deeply broken, and you think of, well, how do you build trust? Well, you spend a lot of time in proximity with people, across the table or whatever, and in COVID you can't do any of that. You can get there, 80, 90%, in a conversation like this via Zoom, but it's tough. It's tough to see someone's heart extensively via Zoom.

William:

It's not the same.

Tim Stevens:

It's not the same. That's been a challenge that we're still figuring out. I think another piece of that, anyone that goes into an organization, you tell them, "Don't change anything for a season, because you need to build trust." As we walked in, because of COVID and because of the last couple of years of a downturn for the church because of the scandals, we were walking in, and probably within a month or two of being here realized we don't have the luxury of waiting to initiate some change.

Tim Stevens:

That's even more hard, when you don't have the time to build the trust. You're trying to build the trust through screens, and you have to make some changes pretty quick. We've been in the middle of that. I think through summer and fall of 2020, really having to reorient our staff, save lots of money on staffing, restructure and build a whole new model. We're really excited about where we're going as a church in the future, but it's going to take some time to get there.

William:

Some kind of honeymoon.

Tim Stevens:

Yeah, that's right.

William:

I was talking to another guest on one of the episodes in the series, and I said, "Golly, I guess you had a virtual honeymoon." I just stopped after I said it and I said, "That's the most depressing term I think I've

ever heard. Who wants a virtual honeymoon? I mean, that's really not the point." Teach me. How do you lead change with a new team when you can't be near them?

Tim Stevens:

Yeah. Well, ask me in two years if it was successful or not. The verdict is still out on that. I think in a lot of ways it's doing the best you can with what you have. Building relationships, it means spending 30 hours a week in front of a screen, doing lots and lots of one-on-ones. We started by just the first probably month of doing nothing but listening. We'd have eight to ten hours a day with five to ten to fifteen people on a Zoom screen.

Tim Stevens:

Just, "What are your challenges? Where do you see opportunities? Where has the church been? Where has the church succeeded, where has the church failed in your specific ministry or department or your position?" Lots and lots of just listening. Like any change, the bell curve of change, a good percentage of early adopters, a percentage of people that probably were never going to move with us, and then a whole lot of people in the middle that we just are taking time to listen to and learn from.

Tim Stevens:

We've tried to, and I'm sure to some degree successfully and to some degree not, but tried to really talk vision, tried to tap into what is good about the DNA of Willow. There's so much that is good about the DNA of Willow. Some of it's still alive and bright and vibrant. Some of it's just dormant. It just hasn't been focused on in recent years. What's really good about that, what can we tap into and bring alive, breathe some freshness into it? Because that's the piece that wakes people up, and has really given people a sense of connection to what Willow means to them and what Willow might be in the future.

William:

That's good. That's good. Talk to me about, I mean, in some ways you were going home again. Willow's been a church you've looked up to, and judging by your sweatshirt, you're closer to where you want to live geographically than Texas. Talk to me about relocating during a time when it's hard to relate. There are people listening to this right now who are relocating right now, and we're still not fully open. We're still not fully ... so any tips you've learned on managing your marriage, building relationships, that have come to you the hard way and can save us some stupid tax?

Tim Stevens:

Yeah. I would say as we sit here recording this, I'm about eight months in, and we still haven't had any large public Sunday gatherings. We've been experimenting the last six weeks at three of our campuses with very small gatherings. There's 98% of the congregation I've never even been in the same room with or had a chance to meet in person, and same would be for Dave and the rest of our team.

Tim Stevens:

Family-wise, we've just been trying to engage, Faith and I, as soon we got here. We have the advantage ... and it's new for us and we don't exactly know what it is yet ... but it's called empty nester season. We tried it for about a half a year, and then COVID hit and our son came home. Now he's back again, down at Baylor. Anyway, we've got this new season that we're experimenting with.

Tim Stevens:

For us, we've just tried to engage together with other couples in the church, just two at a time. Really that's been a lifeblood for us. It's enabled us to really ... and we've been initiating it. It hasn't necessarily been initiated towards us, probably mostly because of COVID, but we've just been initiating it and meeting with folks as much as possible. That's been really, really helpful.

Tim Stevens:

I do think the Midwest is familiar for us, and as much as I thought I was never ever going to return, and I'd said that a thousand times and I'd sold my snowblowers and shovels and ice scrapers and all that, we're back, and the Midwest really is home for us for 47 of my 53 years. There's something about that that's familiar. Being back plugged in, even though I never thought I'd be back plugged into a local church, that connection has been really good for us again.

William:

That's great. I'm just thinking of all the things you've had to do with the pandemic that you didn't see. You've had to do some layoffs. How do you fire somebody over Zoom?

Tim Stevens:

Yeah, that's been challenging. You guys helped us with understanding the PPP process, and that helped the church April, May, June. Then when we got to July and we went through some furloughs, I think we furloughed about 80 people. This wasn't related to restructure or downsizing. These were just folks that couldn't do their job. They were folks that took care of facilities and did food services and things that just weren't really a thing anymore, with buildings being closed. Then we got into the fall, and that's when the deep cuts, as far as we need to right-size this thing. The church is still staffed like it was ... size-wise, FTEs ... like it was six years ago when the church was much bigger, and then restructure around a new vision. There's significant restructure that needed to take place around that.

Tim Stevens:

The first thing we did is like, "Okay, how do we do this graciously during a pandemic? How do you have a conversation like that during a pandemic?" We just thought there are probably people that are here that are here because they have to be, not because they want to be, either because just life transition ... kids are now home e-learning, but they still have to work because they need the funds and they can't find anything else during COVID ... or maybe they just like the previous leaders and the previous vision better than the current leaders and current vision, which is totally fine and legitimate.

Tim Stevens:

We just made the decision in early September, implemented it just across every single person on staff, let's give them two weeks to decide if they want off the bus, and we'll have a financial care package attached to that that will take care of them well into 2021. I think that was a hard thing to do, because we lost some people that we didn't want to lose, but I think it was the right thing to do.

Tim Stevens:

It gave some people an opportunity to transition that wouldn't have been able to. One of the guys who's been here for 24 years said, "You know what? My grandkids are all on the East Coast. I didn't know when I'd get back out there, but I knew I needed to. This gave me an opportunity for that." Others, "I've

been looking for a chance to stay home with the kids. This gives us a little bit of a window to be able to do that." We had about a hundred people take us up on that. Now we're in the midst of reshuffling and filling the roles, as well as staffing some new positions that tie into where we're going as a church overall.

William:

Yeah. I'm thinking. You've done the glamorous travel life with me.

Tim Stevens:

It's so glamorous.

William:

Oh, my gosh. All of us that are in any kind of consulting where you move around have seen this movie called Up in the Air with George Clooney. It's like Death of a Salesman, but times 50. He basically fires people for companies. He's an outsourced person that fires people during layoffs. I don't know if you remember the end of the movie. The young Anna Kendrick had the brilliant idea that we could do this virtually, and the first guy she fires kills himself. It's like horrible. The point was, even though flying around makes no sense at all, there's some holy conversations that just have to be face-to-face. Have you learned anything about, when you're forced to not do it face-to-face, what have you found that's pastoral or can soften the blow or help?

Tim Stevens:

You know, that's challenging, because there are times when you just don't have a choice. I resigned to you via Zoom. From the last time I physically saw you and the next time, I was going from I was on staff and never leaving to I was suddenly at Willow. It's just it really is challenging. There's not a lot you're going to be able to do about that.

Tim Stevens:

This fall, probably 50 to 70%, maybe, of those conversations were in person, or could be in person. The rest of them were via Zoom, because the person had a health issue or kids or a reason that they weren't able to meet in person. That's really, really hard. I just think you've just got to say it out loud and acknowledge the fact that this is awkward and this is not what we prefer, and this is not the way we wanted this conversation to go down.

Tim Stevens:

I think you can come around them and love on them and their family in other ways through `guests, their cars through other ways, just to make sure that they know that you care. To me, that's the key thing in any layoff conversation. Whether they're excited about leaving or whether it's for cause or whether it's just like, "We don't have a position for you anymore," I think the key is coming around with care, and especially in the local church context.

Tim Stevens:

Now that I've worked in nonprofit, for-profit and church, I'm just reminded again of just the deep webs of relationship in church, and that conversation isn't just a conversation with an employee. It's their



brother and their sister and their aunt and their uncle, and their friends in their small group and the kids that they hang out with at the youth group, that all are impacted by that conversation.

William:

That's good. That's good. Anything you wish you would have done differently, where you say, "Oh, man, my first hundred days in this mess, I wish I had done X, Y, Z"?

Tim Stevens:

I think we had some missteps with communication in some situations where we should have communicated more. I think we were coming in with some assumptions that it took us a few months to figure out either weren't true, or were landmines that were there that we didn't know. You step on one or two of those, and then you start to figure that out.

Tim Stevens:

I'm the Executive Pastor Campuses, so I'm directly connected to all the campus pastors and then to their leadership teams and their staff. I think I would have assumed less and been more aggressive in communication, overcommunication, this summer as we were initiating changes. That's something that we're learning and trying to catch up as we go. Yeah, that's something that I think we could have done better with.

William:

Well, watching the view from here to Willow, COVID or not, you guys were probably looking at having to make massive change. I can't think of two guys better to try and steward that. As you said, people ask me all the time, "How successful have your placements been?" I'm like, "Ask me in 20 years." Who knows, but man, I'm so proud of the way you and Dave are handling what you can, in a season unlike really anything we've seen in our lifetime.

Tim Stevens:

Thanks. I think you're right, and it's not just Dave and me. We've been building the leadership team all summer, all last summer and fall. We got Robin Riley from Mariners and Megan Bagnall from Saddleback and Chris Hahn from Southland and Sherita Harkness from Atlanta, from North Point. We've got this dream team coming together, which has just been ... I think when you have the right team, you can overcome just about anything. Anything becomes surmountable if you have the right team around you, and it sure feels like we got the right team.

William:

That's great. Well, thanks for making time for us. I know you're busy. By now, whatever happened to Notre Dame will have happened, so congrats or condolence. I'm not sure which.

Tim Stevens:

If we only made it to the championship, that's fine. That's fine.

William:

Okay. Thanks so much, Tim. Thanks to all of you for tuning in. Check out the rest of this series, and then watch as we continue this trend of dropping entire series at once. Give us feedback on what you'd like

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to see more or less of, and we'll look forward to hearing from you. The show notes, you're going to want to know Tim's blog, Leading Smart. You may want to know about his coaching networks for executive pastors. You may want to know about Willow. All those things are in the show notes. Just go to [vandercast.com](http://vandercast.com) and you can sign up to receive that. We wish you the best, Tim. Wish all you the best, and we'll see you again soon.

Anna Baker:

Thanks for listening to this special series. For more inspiration and insight on navigating the impacts of 2020 and moving forward with courage and focus, be sure to check out the other two episodes released in this series on the truth behind starting a job during a pandemic.

Anna Baker:

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