

Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership podcast. I'm your host, Holly Tate, Vice President of Business Development here at Vanderbloemen. On today's episode, our VP of sales and client relations, Sarah Robins, talks with Dave Miles and Gregg Caruso from VitalChurch Ministry, which is an organization of pastors who are called to the unique ministry of helping churches through times of transition or crisis through a proven, Biblically-based process. VitalChurch Ministry understands that navigating through a transition or crisis can be a difficult task for leaders in any church, so Sarah talks with Dave and Gregg about how difficult situations can lead to helpful development opportunities among leaders.

Speaker 1:

This conversation provides an encouraging reminder that through crisis, the Lord is still good and He works in the middle of our trials. 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. We'll even post a behind-the-scenes video of today's interview in the Facebook group. Without further ado, here's Sarah's conversation with Dave Miles and Gregg Caruso.

Sarah Robins:

I am very excited, as we always are, to have a couple colleagues in ministry that I've gotten to know over the years with us today from VitalChurch. I have Dave Miles and Gregg Caruso. They are a ministry, if you're not familiar with them, that does ... it's hard to say just "interim pastor ministries," because they do so much more than that. We've had a lot of client overlap with them and worked with several churches that have used them as a guide through big, big, heavy transitions. Gregg, Dave, really glad to have you here today.

Dave Miles:

Thank you.

Gregg Caruso:

Thanks for having us, yeah.

Sarah Robins:

Yeah, yeah. This should be fun. A quick introduction, like I said, VitalChurch, their ministry, they do a lot of intentional interim work. Beyond that, they do a lot of diagnostic, getting in with the church, helping them navigate the transition, so these guys and the folks that are on their team with them walk into a lot of crisis situations. Correct me if I'm wrong, you wouldn't say that every situation you're walking into is crisis, but you do have a lot of heaviness in the work that you're doing, right?

Gregg Caruso:

We'd say crisis and/or transition.

Sarah Robins:

Yeah, that's really good.

Gregg Caruso:

Transition can be crisis, but it's not always.

Dave Miles:

Yeah.

Sarah Robins:

Yeah, we're definitely seen that. Dave and Gregg are both, I guess we'd call partners and leaders in the ministry. They oversee different parts. Gregg does a lot of work with VitalChurch UK, so they have a whole ministry over there. I've actually talked to Gregg while ... he lives in the states, but while he was in the UK doing work with a partner church over there. These guys are busy and have just seen a whole, whole lot.

Sarah Robins:

Again, like I said, we're going to talk about some of what they work through crisis-wise, and I guess I kind of wanted to start, Gregg, if you don't mind kind of kicking us off, thinking through you said crisis or transition, they don't necessarily have to be the same. Churches out here are working through, and if you're hearing this right now, we're in the middle of COVID-19, it's going to come up. If this podcast airs months from now, it might seem a little off topical, but we're just thinking about it all the time. Working through crisis. Gregg, tell me about what you guys see or sense when you're walking into these situations, and a big thing for a church to think through when it hits. Just kind of starting at the beginning, when crisis hits and you guys are walking in.

Gregg Caruso:

I think it's good communication-wise ... I remember one time where the pastor did something stupid and we had to pull something together in just a couple days to be able to tell the congregation, so we quickly got the leaders together, it's important that they hear things first so that they feel affirmed and appreciated, and then just walk through it. Good communication up-front. One of the things that we would say we need to create for change is sense of urgency, but we also have to be a non-anxious presence. I think that's one of the most important things that we can offer a church going in is that non-anxious presence, because anxiety is already high because of this situation, crisis, or otherwise. Just going in there and being calm and loving and leading and listening is really, really important in those moments. Not trying to fix people, not trying to be defensive or let other people be defensive. That's kind of how we like to go in.

Dave Miles:

We typically have more questions than answers. Our tagline is, "We revitalize churches in transition or crisis." You would think that we'd have tons of answers and so forth. The mindset that we want to go in with is curiosity. We have more questions than answers. We come in, we try to be, to Gregg's point, kind of a humble presence and keep the anxiety low because high anxiety creates reactivity, reactivity creates bad choices, and in many cases, the reason why the church is in the situation they're in to begin with. That's very much what we try to do.

Sarah Robins:

That's really good. One of the things that you both said when you were walking into them, lower the anxiety, be a calm presence. Is that something that you feel like that the leaders that are, or I'm sure sometimes there's a lack of leadership when you're walking into this with the leaders in these ministries

that you're walking into have missed that? Is that one of the number one or number two things that you would recommend to a church that is navigating crisis? And what else beyond that?

Gregg Caruso:

I think I would encourage them to, I always go back to Nehemiah, or I find myself going back to Nehemiah often. Just slow down. In a crisis, as Dave said, anxiety is high and elder boards get nervous and staff gets nervous. "Get us a preacher" kind of thing. By the time we get there, it's like, "When's the preacher going to get here?" [inaudible 00:06:35]. We say, "Go back to Nehemiah. Slow down. Do what Nehemiah did." Nehemiah took time to grieve, and I think that's part of what we need to bring into the context, too, is what that is.

Gregg Caruso:

Good grief, my mom was a hospice nurse, so I kind of grew up in that environment, and I think that helps. I think, like Nehemiah, we need to own what we can own in that. Nehemiah said, "Me and my father's house have sinned," so that's big for us to go in there and invite people to own what they can own instead of pointing fingers at each other, at the pastor that did something stupid. They need to pray and fast and seek the Lord. They need to make a plan. Those are all the things that allowed Nehemiah to be successful in a very crisis situation.

Dave Miles:

They have to, what is real in a situation? To pretend that things are okay when they're not okay never helps anybody because the people who want to think things are okay will feel defrauded when they discover things aren't okay, and the people who have known all along that things aren't okay, they're angry and the leaders in those situations oftentimes lose credibility. What is reality here and facing that?

Dave Miles:

Gregg and I were talking last night a little bit about this. Almost every time that we go into a church in transition or crisis, the issue is not really the issue.

Gregg Caruso:

That's correct.

Dave Miles:

The presenting issue isn't the problem. There's something underneath the surface. Edwin Friedman wrote a book from Generation to Generation, the whole series of science, family systems stuff, that there's always something underneath the surface. Maybe it's Tim Keller that talks about the sin behind the sin. That's what we're looking for.

Dave Miles:

When you enter into those situations and whatever the issue looks like it is, we know pretty much after a quarter century of doing this, we know that that's probably not the issue. Most lay leaders, that's what they want to deal with. Again, to Gregg's point, they want the preacher in right now. Let's get that person in right now.

Dave Miles:

There's this quick fix kind of mentality and it rarely ... I don't think I'll ever say never, but it rarely works out that way, that these things are resolved quickly. It's often more difficult, more complicated, and much deeper than people imagine. Being honest about that, I mean, brutally honest about that, is really part of what churches have to be aware of and also it actually allows leaders that have messed up to regain people's trust, because frankly, a lot of people know things are screwed up anyways and they're just waiting for the leaders to actually admit it.

Sarah Robins:

Dave, if you don't mind, talk a little more about that. If I am a leader in crisis, the communication of it. How much would you guys say that you should share, moral failure, embezzlement, things like that, or even just the board did not get along with the senior pastor. How much do you think should be communicated to the congregation?

Dave Miles:

It gets complicated and frankly, there's no simple answer. In some cases, you've got church discipline situations where there's serious moral failure. You need to be honest about that. On the other hand, you've got HR issues in our Western part of the world, the United States, that you have to take those things into consideration as well. I do know this, that leaders, when faced with this kind of thing, they've got to commit to tell the truth. Don't lie, because as soon as you lie, you fudge just a little bit, people are going to catch you and then that's what they're going to hang onto.

Dave Miles:

I wish there was a really black and white issue, but church discipline, HR issues, these are all realities that we have to consider, but to the best of our ability, we're as open as possible.

Dave Miles:

Here's something that I've learned. Whatever you keep in the dark, Satan uses in the dark. We're children of light, Paul says in Ephesians chapter five. We're to walk in the light. If you keep serious sin in the dark, well, Satan uses that. As believers, we want to be as open as possible to address the real issues while at the same time protecting people, adhering to the laws of our land, and so forth.

Gregg Caruso:

I do think, too, there's an art form in being able to take difficult things in a winsome way. It needs to be developed. Dave and I have learned how to do that most of the time.

Dave Miles:

Yeah, not always. [crosstalk 00:11:37].

Gregg Caruso:

We have some other people on our team, but it is something to be developed. I think one of the things about us that's distinctive about VitalChurch is that we're pastors. We're not consultants. We go in loving the church. I think more times than not, they see our love for the church and then for them, and we can say more difficult things. We also can take on kind of a bad cop role, especially in a diagnostic situation. We can say the hard thing that the person that's going to be there doesn't need to say. We can do that.

Gregg Caruso:

I've also found that I've realized over the last few years, I don't need to be liked anymore when I go into a church. It only takes about 30 years to get there. I want to be liked, but I don't need that anymore. I think that allows me in some way to love the church better, when I don't need something from them. I feel a little more differentiated than I ever have been.

Dave Miles:

Sadly, I still need to be liked. I honestly struggle because you can't do this without making mistakes. It's kind of like running into a burning building, in many cases. You know you're going to get in and you're going to get burned, or in some cases crushed, and some of it's your own fault. It's difficult to go into. A lot of that, for me, it's something that we invite the congregation into. That is taking our identity in who Christ is and what he's done on our behalf. Applying the gospel and recognize that we're more broken and sinful than we had ever imagined, and yet more loved than we'd ever hoped. If we could have that kind of a mindset and invite a congregation into that mindset so that Christ and the gospel shapes their hearts, over time it's not that big a deal to own what's real. It's not that big a deal to face what's real because since we've been given grace, we're going to give grace to other people if we really understand what Christ has done for us.

Dave Miles:

Anchoring our identity in Christ and in his work on our behalf, that's really, it's the essence of the theology that drives this whole thing. And for that reason, and Gregg runs the diagnostic piece. He's way more involved in that than I am. For that reason, when we have to give tough news, it's not scolding. It's not shaming. It's inviting. We are one broken person saying to another broken person, "Let's let Christ deal with this." For that reason, we try to be honest about our own stuff. Sometimes it bites us in the butt, it does me, but we try.

Dave Miles:

I can, now more than ever, because as an older man, it's taken years, but I'm anchored in who Christ is and what he's done for me, and this call to live out a radically counter-cultural lifestyle through his kingdom, all part of the gospel, and when you start doing that, people see it and they make comments about it. I think Gregg said this and it was blamed on me, but it was great. I was glad to take credit for what he said. He said to one church, at one point, and he does this, he's weeping and he says, "You guys allowed this to happen." But it's said with such kindness that they make comments about it. "That transformed my life." Why, because he scolded them? No. Because he invited them into the grace of God, something that he's experiencing radically.

Dave Miles:

Our staff, we want to anchor in Christ. That kind of gives us the right ... I don't want to be talking too much, but it's almost as if God has said to us, "If you're going to mess with my church, I'm going to mess with you first." Dealing with our own stuff, I think ... I don't know, Gregg, what do you think? Dealing with our own stuff has been at least a good chunk of how God has shaped me to move into these congregations in times of crisis or transition.

Gregg Caruso:

Yeah, I'll go ahead and share with them. There's a phrase that I use. I'm a reactor on the lifelong journey to become a responder. I'll say that to the congregation. I'll say that in an elders meeting. I'll say that in a

staff meeting. I've always been this truth-teller, but I've learned over the decades how to speak the truth in love better. But I still need somebody, one of the elders or one of the staff or anybody in the congregation to be able to say, "You know, when you did that, you were a little sharp in that comment that you made." I'll stop at the end of a staff meeting or at the end of an elders meeting and say, "Are we okay relationally?," to take the time to ask certain questions.

Gregg Caruso:

I figured out my own triggers in that regard, too. If I'm tired or frustrated or just plain angry, I can be sharp, so I take the time and I kind of model that to them too. "Was I okay?" I can tell, if my wife's in the room I get the look, and I know instantly. If it's just in a room, I just have to be able to say to them, "This is still an ongoing part of my life and so I need your help." When I do that, that opens up them to be able to be willing to do that as well with some of their issues.

Sarah Robins:

That's awesome.

Dave Miles:

If I could just throw one other thing in here, it's kind of along the lines of what we're talking about, Sarah. That is that crisis and transition are often revelatory, and they reveal the content of the heart in people, the individuals and leaders involved, and they reveal the content of the heart in the church involved. When you walk into a situation, in some kind of significant transition, it's almost as if God is telling us, "Hey, I want to address this. It's revelatory." When a congregation finds themselves in one of these kinds of situations, they should be asking, "What's going on?," because it's something, and more often than not, we're not going to be aware of what the real issues is.

Dave Miles:

All of these factors go into ... it's a dance. It's not a formula. It's never check off the boxes. It just doesn't work that way. At least it hasn't work that way for me.

Sarah Robins:

That's good. We can really identify with that because we're walking into churches that are hiring someone, some of them on the other side of the work that they've done with VitalChurch, and again, asking tough questions, like, "Okay, you're saying you want X, Y, and Z, but X, Y, and Z doesn't really line up with what you said earlier about this thing, so let's dig into that." It's definitely a push-pull.

Sarah Robins:

Along those lines, I think a lot of what Vanderbloemen does is, yes, we help you hire people and we find people you probably couldn't find on your own, and we help you move through the process, but more often than not, at the end of the search process when I'm doing feedback calls with clients, I'm hearing stuff like, "Well, the feedback from the consultant on this role was so helpful," or, "They took a look at this and that was just really revealing." Often we hear that that third party view, those fresh eyes, was huge for them.

Sarah Robins:

Along those lines, have you guys seen in crisis that there's like a tipping point when a church needs to bring in a third party, versus trying to work through it on their own? Gregg, maybe Gregg start there.

Gregg Caruso:

One of the things that we've studied and looked at is Revelation two and three, where there is both admiration and admonition given to all of those churches. An example we might have used is what if Jesus came to your church services and went to some small groups, and children's ministry, and outreach, and then he stood up in front of your church and told you what he thinks along the lines of Revelation two. What would he say?

Gregg Caruso:

If a leadership, a congregation, eldership, if they would have trouble identifying both the affirmation and admonition specifically, they need somebody to come in and do an outside engagement. We see that in scripture. Paul had apostolic teams that he sent in to churches and basically a diagnostic measure, Titus for sure and probably Timothy and others.

Gregg Caruso:

I think it's always good to get an outside view. I lead the diagnostic division, so of course I encourage this, but I would encourage the church to do it, like one of our tier ones, a church check-up, every year. Just to be able to see where people are coming from, what's going on, how many conversions, and be able to just have those metrics to be able to minister better and more completely to a church. I would encourage an outside look regularly in that regard.

Dave Miles:

For me, when I think of an outside look, I think the Vanderbloemen Group, you guys, you're brought in at a very critical time in the life of the church, so people are open to hearing from you. They're open because they know that the decision they make will affect them probably for the next decade. That's a long time, a lot of people.

Dave Miles:

They would do that because the lay leaders in many cases just don't have the time or the professional background to do the kind of research you do. We're the same way. When lay leaders who work, some of them work long hours, just don't have the time to put into resolving some of these kinds of things that are often underneath the surface, that's when it's time to bring in a third party. There is a pastoral component to what we do.

Dave Miles:

When there's significant distrust of leadership or when you just don't have the time to work through things, when there's blind spots that you know are there but for the life of you can't figure it out, that's when you need to bring in outside help.

Dave Miles:

Another thing that I would say is do it sooner rather than later. I'd be curious to hear. Gregg actually, because of the diagnostic piece, this is really more his thing than mine, but I guess what I would say after doing this for so many years is that a lot of churches wait far too long to bring in some help, and by

the time that they ask somebody in, whether it's a consultant or V Group or us, it's really hard to unravel that stuff. It's tough.

Gregg Caruso:

Yeah, churches think, "We can do this," so they call us like six months too late. Not too late to help them, but it would have been a lot easier six months ago if we were in there rather than all the issues are compounding now and it can be crazy going in at that point.

Dave Miles:

Or years ago. In some cases, they wait for years, and it just goes down, down, down. I'm talking over a decade, the thing is dropping hundreds of people and they don't do anything. By the time you get to that point, good heavens. Digging yourself out of a hole, that's tough sloggin, and it's not fun. It's not fun. We could give you examples, we just don't want to humiliate anybody.

Gregg Caruso:

I'd rather humiliate Dave.

Dave Miles:

Yeah, go ahead.

Sarah Robins:

That's good. Like you said earlier, we're coming in as an imperfect people as well when we're coming to the table. One of our favorite stories is one of our consultants was interviewing a guy once and we ask questions about your history and background, and we ask some tough questions like moral failures of things like that. He said, "Anything like abuse or moral failures that you've dealt with?" He looked at the consultant and said, "Well, I am a moral failure." And the consultant was like, "Well, that will preach. Okay."

Gregg Caruso:

Yeah.

Sarah Robins:

That's a great point.

Dave Miles:

Yep.

Sarah Robins:

We'll move forward with that.

Gregg Caruso:

Yeah, there is some overlap in what we do and what you do, and I've seen it a few times now. Just helping a church kind of get back to understanding their values, mission, and vision. What are their



distinct ... that's the kind of questions you ask when you come in, too, is to know who they are. If they don't know who they are, how are they going to find somebody to come and be their pastor?

Gregg Caruso:

I talk about the 20-year guy. We're always looking for that guy. We can't guarantee 20 years, but that's what I call the 20-year guy or 20-year person to come in and take over. There is a little overlap.

Sarah Robins:

Oh, yeah. Definitely. I've been able to work with both Gregg and Dave on some stuff before, so it's pretty neat to see it from both ends.

Sarah Robins:

If a church is listening and they are going through crisis, or you never know what's coming down the pipeline sometimes, but what are some quick mistakes that you have seen churches make that you could just list off? Like, "Don't do this," or, "Do this once it hits." Maybe, Dave, you start.

Dave Miles:

Mistakes thinking that it's not a systems issue.

Sarah Robins:

Oh, good.

Dave Miles:

Big mistake. This issue here is the issue. No. There's something underneath it. That's a big mistake. Lying. Honestly, covering up for somebody when you really need to tell the truth and then not telling the truth when you need to.

Dave Miles:

We had one church where the board messed up. We did something called the Sacred Assembly where you publicly repent. One of the guys stood up, it took me back by surprise, I didn't expect him to do it. He said to the congregation, "We lied," and sat down. No one said a word because everybody knew it, and there was grace extended. Avoid the mistake of lying. Be honest.

Dave Miles:

What do you think, Gregg? What else?

Gregg Caruso:

This ties in, but I think it's so important to say is that there's a difference between a minister and a leader. A minister builds people and a leader builds groups of people. What we see in churches a lot is if someone ministers well, they get promoted into leadership. What we have sometimes in crisis situations, things to avoid, is you want the leaders to lead. When we go in, sometimes we have to lovingly at the appropriate times draw that line and just say ... We see elder boards that are more deacons than leaders, so we need to talk to them about that difference. Ministers build people, leaders build groups of people, so to get the right people in the right spots, that's a mistake that a lot of

churches make that multiplies the difficulty of whatever they're going through. They don't have leaders leading.

Dave Miles:

Yeah, leaders lead or leaders leave. If leaders aren't allowed to lead in a church, they'll leave and find someplace where they can. That's why the larger churches, which are typically run not so much by a pastor shepherd, by pastor leaders, actually grow the way they do, because they're welcomed. The leaders who want to lead are actually welcomed into those environments. I want to just affirm that.

Dave Miles:

I think another mistake to avoid is not seeing the part that grief plays in any kind of transition. When congregations fail to grieve, that anger and that hurt, that sadness, they'll take it out on somebody. In some cases, they take it out on us. I had that in one situation where a pastor died and they took all their grief out on me. I've got to tell you something, it was not a fun experience.

Gregg Caruso:

But that's our job.

Dave Miles:

That's our job, yeah, but I'd rather have you do it, Gregg, than me do it.

Gregg Caruso:

Yeah, of course.

Dave Miles:

Yeah. Better you than me is kind of a watch word that we say. You've got to allow the church to pastor in this time of grief, but they don't want to. People will say, "I'm over it." No, you're not. No, you're not, because I can tell the way you're doing this, that, or the other. That's a big mistake to avoid.

Sarah Robins:

That's really good stuff. The leaders lead, leader leave. Yeah, we see that all the time in our succession work specifically. I had a phone call this week with a church who, "Well, our pastor is going to retire in five years, so we want to bring a guy in to really work under him for the next four years, and we really want him to be a very strong leader because our pastor is a strong leader," and I was like, "So, tell me, you think that this strong leader's going to sit here for four years?" I didn't say it like that. I said it in a more loving way, and helped them work through some of that. We see it all the time.

Sarah Robins:

If your pastor's there for four more years, that's great. Let's just think through how do we transition this better and how do we make a plan. We certainly get that. That's awesome.

Sarah Robins:

We need to wrap up, but finally, anything that you guys would say to, if someone's listening right now and they're in leadership at a church, a board, a deacon, executive staff, something like that, Gregg, you start, but just a word of encouragement to them, for them to think through and lean in on.

Gregg Caruso:

A word of encouragement. One of the phrases that I've used in some very difficult situations, I borrowed it from a book by Jerry Setzer. One of the things that I'll say is, "This is a grace disguised opportunity that we have here." I'll go in with that initial vision statement. "This is awful. None of us would ever choose to be in this room, in this space right now with what's going on here. God's up to something." I also think that's a great opportunity in this COVID moment, too. What is God doing? God is up to something beautiful and wonderful, and we get caught up in all the other stuff, but God has something in mind for us, and he's allowed this transition, this crisis to surface. He didn't cause it. He's allowed it to surface. I think of Job, the end of Job, 42. After all he went through, he said, "Before my ears had heard of you, but now my eyes see you." God is always working to bring a greater sense of intimacy to the leaders and to the church, and to zero in on what he could be doing, like Nehemiah did too and the outcome that he saw as well. That would be my encouragement.

Dave Miles:

My encouragement would be to ask a question. It's the question that we see in Revelation two and three. What is the spirit saying to this church? That's our agenda. What's the spirit saying to this church? Do that. Do that. If you do that, and you ask that question, and you're open to the movement of the spirit because of the work of Christ on our behalf, then if the spirit is calling you to change or confess of whatever, then do that. Leave. Make the decision. Even if it's unpopular.

Dave Miles:

Every interaction with a person, every meeting, really, it's an opportunity for discipleship. The Spirit is moving us closer into conformity with Jesus Christ. Again, I want to affirm what Gregg was saying, that God is doing something. What's he doing? If we can discover that and get on board with it, the new things that he's doing, the new wineskins there in Matthew chapter nine, and work in that direction so that it's really a God-driven thing and not organizational re-engineering. It's very pastoral. It's very Spirit-driven. It's gospel rooted. When we do that, even when we mess up, God seems to honor it. If I was a leader in churches, that's really what I want to know. What's the Spirit saying? I'm going to do that, even if it's hard.

Gregg Caruso:

Yeah, just to combine that with what we do with the diagnostic is what we aim to provide for churches, what we call a mirror and a map. The diagnostic, the online survey, that's a mirror. It's not what we think, it's what they told us. Then a map forward. That's our whole goal. What's the Spirit saying, and then to provide them with a mirror to feed back to them what they told us about who they are, and then a map forward with, we usually come up with five to six or seven specific recommendations to correspond to core issues that they really need to pay attention to at this moment. It's all done pastorally.

Sarah Robins:

That's awesome. It is a ... I'm going to use all the words ... cool, amazing, hard, fascinating, crazy work that you guys do for churches. Thankful for it. The churches that we've worked with that have worked with you guys have really been thankful for it. Thank you both. Again, this is VitalChurch Ministries that we've been visiting with. I've got Dave Miles and Gregg Caruso on the call. We've really enjoyed visiting with you guys, and excited to see what God has in store for you all as we move forward.

Dave Miles:

Thanks, Sarah. Appreciate it.

Gregg Caruso:

Thank you for all you do.

Dave Miles:

Yep, we really appreciate it.

Gregg Caruso:

We enjoy Vanderbloemen.

Dave Miles:

We enjoy working with you.

Sarah Robins:

I appreciate it.

Speaker 1:

Thanks for listening to today's episode, where Sarah interviewed Dave Miles and Gregg Caruso from VitalChurch Ministry. Tweet your takeaways from today's show using the hashtag Vandercast and make sure you check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group, where you can check out a behind-the-scenes video from today's interview. If our team at Vanderbloemen can help you with your transition and succession planning or hiring, we would love to talk with you. You can call us at 713-300-9665, or email me, [Holly@Vanderbloemen.com](mailto:Holly@Vanderbloemen.com).