

Anna Baker:

Well happy New Year to the Vanderbloemen community. I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas and I am so excited to welcome you to the first Vanderbloemen leadership podcast of 2021. I'm your host, Anna Baker, senior marketing manager here at Vanderbloemen. And I'm so excited to be kicking off a new year of podcasts with this incredible conversation. For our founder and CEO, William Vanderbloemen talks with Maina Mwaura minister, public speaker, and journalist. William and Maina discuss some of the challenges that the world is facing and navigating race relations. And they provide specific steps that we as Christians can take to pursue racial reconciliation and continue the conversation.

Anna Baker:

Maina brings a unique perspective through his lens as a Christian journalist and shares how his life experiences have come together to influence his understanding of race and what he believes the kingdom of God should look like. This conversation provides an opportunity to uncover common racial misconceptions, and it reminds us of how God prepares us in unexpected ways or what he calls us to do. Tweet your takeaways from today's show using the #vanderblast 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 Maina.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, Hey everybody. I am glad to have my friend Maina Mwaura with us. Maina is a journalist. He's been in ministry work for a long time. I'm going to let him introduce himself in just a minute, but this is another installment in my effort and our effort as a company to really understand what we don't know about race relations and how we're trying really hard to make Earth look a little more like heaven, where it's every tribe and tongue and not just people that look like me. And if you know our firm, we've done work with some of the most historic African-American churches for really from day one. I'm not real sure why, but we keep getting asked by some of the most prolific African-American pastors to come in and help them. And so I felt like we were ahead of the curve, but all the horrible tragedy of this spring has just sort of punched me in the spiritual gut and made me say, we really need to understand more.

William Vanderbloemen:

So Maina I appreciate you making time. I'd interview you for anything, but we did ask you for a real specific reason today, and I appreciate you being willing to step into that conversation.

Maina Mwaura:

It's good to be here, first of all. I think a lot of you William. And of course, I think almost every pastoral friend that I know William, when they see your name come up, man, it's good stuff. And so I got to tell you, it is an honor to be here today with you.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, thanks. Tell our listeners a little bit of your story and your journey and what you're doing now.

Maina Mwaura:

Yeah. I won't go too far back William, but I would say grew up in Orlando, Florida. And literally man went to school at Liberty University. Left Liberty, went to grad school at New Orleans Theological and then did

20 years or 21 years in full-time ministry man. And then about four years ago man, the Lord just threw us a curve ball I would say William. It said, we're going to go do something else. And that's how the whole journalism and interviewing came into play. And so for the last four years William, I think it's been a privilege man, to get to know and to dig in to some I think some of the coolest people when it comes to influential leaders. At the same time dig in and write on some of the greatest stories that we're going through in our culture. And I look at 2020 boy and I go, man, this is a great time to be doing ministry and looking at history, especially when it comes to race.

William Vanderbloemen:

I think that whether it's race relations or this pandemic, or just the natural disasters that have happened, or I mean, we've got a presidential election this year that's polarizing the two dogs in my house. I mean, like everybody's got an opinion, you know? So I think when we get to heaven, I'm not an old Baptist guy. I didn't do a want to growing up or some people pioneer clubs, but you didn't get the badge for this or that. I think in heaven, some of us who wear a badge saying, yeah, I did 2020.

Maina Mwaura:

Oh my gosh. I would start buying those and sell them William., You survived 2020, here is a badge. Oh man.

William Vanderbloemen:

It'd be interesting to hear. So you're doing journalism, you're doing kind of freelance reporting now, is that right?

Maina Mwaura:

I am and enjoying it. A typical day William could go from, well, I say today where it could be [crosstalk 00:04:54] because they're in a row I just came off with to Sandy Patty and Laurel Harris after our time. So it's all in one. William it's kind of one of those weird days, man.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well and then I saw a picture you posted and there's air force one in the background behind you. And I'm like, okay, so you're kind of everywhere.

Maina Mwaura:

Yeah. That could be another day or it could be Sean Handy in the morning and Jane Elliott in the afternoon. So I don't want to [inaudible 00:05:19] all in one. I love it though. You see this and what you guys do. Man, the diversity of the body of Christ is rich William. [crosstalk 00:05:30] We don't think about that often, but there aren't very many organizations like ours William. [crosstalk 00:05:39] our movements. Where it's this stuff hurts where you have people who on one side and people on the other side and one day we get to heaven. I think we're all going to be there. And we're all going to go, dang we're all here. And man, I think the Lord will make things, obviously we'll make things right.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow. Well talk to me a little bit about how your world has changed because I know it has, it's accelerated a lot because you're a good reporter over the last three or four years. But particularly since

the race issues kind of came front and center late this spring. Give me a before and after picture of how your world is?

Maina Mwaura:

You know William, I think like most people I can tell you when things have fundamentally changed for me and it would've been in March. March 13th, that's the date edged in my mind, when I would say I went from interviewing, writing stories about things inviting Christ, William. To all of a sudden going into COVID season and then William you get to May. I'll never forget that Friday, like crazy.

Maina Mwaura:

I woke up to interview Andrew Young that morning and William that afternoon I was in a riot, not participated in one but covering one. And I would say that was the aha moment for me here in Atlanta in the sense of we're in a new era. And there are people who are on all sides of this and they're all expressing themselves. I don't think I've ever seen a day like that in my 46 years, William. [crosstalk 00:07:14] That dramatically just jarring to me to go from hearing from a civil rights leader, ambassador Young that morning to walking into what he dealt with back in the sixties. [crosstalk 00:07:28] Very surreal day. But I knew things had changed that day though. And that how I saw race and how I'm dealing with race would never be the same.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah. Well, it's interesting. I'm hopelessly an optimist, right? I think that we live in a play that ends well and not one that ends like a tragedy. And so, I'm always looking for silver linings and it's hard to find silver linings with COVID. So many people have gotten sick and so many deaths. But I will say, I've talked to so many people, one pastor said it so well. He said, he's got a woman on his staff who said, the question was, how are things at home right now going around the table as a staff? And a woman said, my husband is so mad right now. And he doesn't know who to be mad at. And it was the whole pandemic and the economy and the staying at home and all the things. And I kind of wonder if one of the silver linings in the pandemic, it opened us up emotionally so that when something horrific happens on a race front, we react rather than just going on with regular life. Does that make sense?

Maina Mwaura:

It does. You look at this and I do think the play does end well. I do man, I'm very hopeful of that. We look at how God did give us that time, I would say of silence and maybe even rest for some of us. And I know the COVID season was not not kind, man. But it did give us that time to really stop and pause that when we did walk into this race era, we were ready to take a harder look at it, William, than what we previously would have. I don't think that we were doing life as normal, that we would have stopped and looked at it clearly. I think we would've kept on going through to be fair.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, it's been a new day for us and we're committed to it. Not being just something that's a one news cycle story, but it's a part of who we are. Because as you and I've spoken, we really have done an unusually large amount of work with African-American churches. I want now to be more intentional and I'm sensing that there are more churches that want to be intentional in their neighborhoods that have changed. So, probably one out of five or six searches we do, we get a request like our neighborhood is shifted to whatever it's shifted to because population shift and we need a younger person or Latino person, or like we got to match the people around the radius of our church, right? So that's all fine and

well, but we're learning that... Okay, I can say this because I pastored in Alabama, I'm going to kind of pick. So if you're an Alabama, just forgive me.

William Vanderbloemen:

But let's pretend there's a pretend church called the Dixie community church in nowhere, Alabama. And they fly a Confederate flag higher than they fly an US flag and they're a hundred percent white and they call me and say, now, can you find me a black associate pastor? And it's like, Oh man, there are probably a few steps between here and there to get the church ready for this. And so, we built a diversity practice and we actually have opened it. We have diversity coaching that we do before we ever get to doing a search for diversity.

William Vanderbloemen:

And what I'm learning is I don't know nearly as much as I knew, as I thought I knew. I'm learning as I go. So these conversations teach me. So as you help people understand the reality of racial tension and what it's like, particularly what it's like being a black man, that's a conservative evangelical that went to Liberty. Like that's not a large population [swag 00:11:34]. Tell me what the... And I love Liberty. They've done great things. It's a good school. Tell me misconceptions that you hear white people having or things that I might not know. Teach me. I want to learn.

Maina Mwaura:

I think for both sides, sometimes you hear when you are a conservative evangelical who came from a sort of an evangelical school or background in general, William. You sometimes here, man you're not black enough. And you get it from all sides. I mean, whether it's from my white friends or whether it's from even my black friends who will go, man, you don't have the street cred to really answer some of the questions. And it's painful when you hear it from either side, to be fair. Because William, have the truth of the matter is, man, our skin tone is not going to change, man here [crosstalk 00:12:28]. And so because someone may have gone to a certain place or done certain things, it doesn't mean that they don't get it because who they are and what they look like doesn't change.

Maina Mwaura:

So, that's always the hard part in that sometimes I talk to people who were in my category, William. Who would go, man, I was the first hire at an all white church. And they thought I was too liberal or they'll go to a predominately black church and serve there. And they'll think they're to quote unquote white European to a certain degree. And so it's one of those deals in a very diverse world, William. Is that we're going to need more people who have done all of those things, man. But it doesn't mean that they're different or changed because they're still in the same skin color still, William.

William Vanderbloemen:

So let's jump into your time at Liberty. Now, Liberty has been in the news a whole lot, the latter half of this year. We won't go there with that. But well, I mean, we could I guess, but that's low hanging clickbait. Let's not do that. Let's instead, drop me back to when you're at Liberty. Like give me an... I don't even know what the demographics would have looked like. And then what were some of the challenges that you faced being a black man in a predominantly white setting that your white friends didn't know? Does that make sense? Like tell me what I don't know.

Maina Mwaura:

What I didn't know at that time though, it was what God was doing for the future is I think it's interesting how God webs our lives, William, to a large degree. I came out of a predominantly black neighborhood and a multicultural school. Literally. I think it was one of the most multicultural schools at the time in Orlando and went to a predominantly white church. So you step into this predominantly white university campus at that time, I think it was 15% black, which is pretty normal lines then at that point in time. And here you are in this new world and you're meeting people who have never come outside of their world, William. And I'd say, number one is helping people understand that the world is bigger than their just all white world, man. And sometimes that's tough because if all you know is one thing and you see people who are different, you are trying to understand, okay, where did this difference come from?

Maina Mwaura:

And so it was helping people understand the world's bigger than the one place that you came out of. And then the second thing was, William it was tough, was how people understand that the kingdom in itself needs to comprise all different people, man. And that's even tougher sometimes if you come from a predominantly one race school, one race church. You don't really see the kingdom like that, William. And so tough at times helping people understand that the world's bigger than what you saw from your slides, at the same time that the kingdom is going to be way bigger than what you saw in your slides. And the third thing is sometimes it's not all, William, but getting the respect from people because they don't see people like you and the respect level may not be there.

William Vanderbloemen:

So, let's overlay that onto a church setting, right? So you're at Liberty and I didn't realize 15% is actually better than I would have guessed.

Maina Mwaura:

At that time. Now it's like 4% unfortunately.

William Vanderbloemen:

Okay. Well, so let's pretend I'm a pastor and I'm hiring and we're predominantly a white church and we're hiring an African-American. It'd be the first African-American on staff that we've had. What are some things you could teach me to help them acclimate and onboard other than just being nice and Christian. Like what are some race specific [crosstalk 00:16:52] that might be helpful?

Maina Mwaura:

Man, good question William. I love what you guys are doing in the sense of helping people understand diversity training because that is huge to a large degree. So I would say number one, understanding that person's world, and you may ask them, how do you do that? I do think it does start off with great books like Be the Bridge or Jemar Tisby's book is another one Compromise Color, I believe what its title of that is called. So it is literally doing the homework what I would say, William. If they're going through your right firm there then they do need to do the homework and do the diversity training man, to be fair. Because it's one of those things where we all bring stuff with us, William, to any relationship, man. Good, bad, indifferent, baggage maybe, but we all bring stuff and it helps understand what people are going to bring when they come onto your church staff.

Maina Mwaura:

And also apart of doing the homework is training and asking your people, Hey, we're going in this direction. Do you see anything? Do you have any glaring errors that you think we have here at our church? And we all have some, William. So it's not a matter of, no we don't. That's not true because we're imperfect people. So we all have something. So it is doing the homework William. It really is. And I would say, be upfront with that staff member who's coming on to literally go, okay, here's who we are. Here's our good and bad. Here is what you're going to get yourself into. So they understand what they're coming into at the same time, the person who is coming in it is asking them, Hey, what are your thoughts about coming into this new and interesting place that you're going to be coming in into also. And culturally, what do you bring into it as well? I think the more honest up front we are with one another in this area, the better off I think it's going to go.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, I am really hopeful that this is not just something that was a 2020 memory. It seems like God has a way of bringing different storms to an intersection point that creates an opportunity for real change. And it feels that way as you cover stories, are you feeling like the race relations issue is going off people's radar or staying on it or getting more on it? Does that make sense? Because I mean, we live in a day where there's a new cycle every five minutes. So like, is this going away or is it here? Does that make sense? You're a reporter. You're out there. You're feeling it.

Maina Mwaura:

I think we're in a very revealing season right now. And so a lot has been exposed, a lot has been revealed. Liberty University forces... I went to school there. And when we had to deal with issue of race there a few months ago, William, it really kind of helped me understand, man, we still have some homework to do with the body of Christ. And so I think we have to really stop and honestly know our history in the evangelical community in that we've not always been the best, William, right? And that's why it's so important to do the homework, to take a look and go, what are people saying? And what are my kids saying? You know it's interesting. It's weird to me, William... Not weird, it's exciting in a lot of ways. But what generation Z, when they take a look at a church's website, William, and they see just one race anything, they automatically go, man, this is traditional, man.

Maina Mwaura:

It's so bizarre how when I'm interviewing generation Z'ers and I did a study recently with some of them about search websites, William. That's not come out yet. And you take them to certain ones, they see the church staff page and they see all one and they go, wow, it looks like nice website, but they're traditional. Compare when they see a website of different races and different makeups they tend to go, man, contemporary. So I think we have to know what's coming, William. The truth of the matter is generation Z and millennials in general, they're used to color. And so, they see stuff through a very authentic lens if it has color into it. I'm not saying it's right or wrong, it's just brought up with them what they see. And so I think we're getting a revelation to a large degree of... I don't mean, a spiritual type deal with that William. Or maybe it could be in some places, but there's a lot of revealing going on, man. And how you handle that is going to tell us a lot.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's good. Well, as we close out our time, I'd love to just ask you some fun questions. Like what's one of the easiest people you've gotten to interview. Like there's just man, that was no work at all.

Maina Mwaura:

That's great. Thanks William. There are a lot of good ones. You know who I would say, of course Jimmy Carter would be one that was just easy in the sense of just a great guy to be around. You know Ken Starr would be another one that I thought was just a... Anything in politics William believe it or not, some people may laugh at this. Anything about politics is honestly easy and it's weird.

William Vanderbloemen:

Really?

Maina Mwaura:

Yeah, because when a politician comes to the table, they automatically are coming with a personality for the most part, 90% [crosstalk 00:22:28]. So they're fun to talk to and be around with. We would find that really interesting, but they would be one that I would go, man, they're just fun to just be around, man. That would be the easiest and the funnest, I guess, is anybody in politics which is interesting.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's great. That is very interesting. And what would you say would be a couple of the lessons you've learned about asking good questions over the years?

Maina Mwaura:

Know the person. That always helps in a large extent, at the same time, ask questions that your friends want to know the answer to. So, it's one of those deals where if you'll take that, I mean, you'll have a great interview, honestly. And William, somebody told me this early on, that's a matter of the person was a good friend of mine. He goes Maina, if you'll be pastoral on these interview calls, man, it'll take you a long way. And I didn't know what that meant at the time, but I know what it means now in a sense of when people come and they're sharing their story with you, that man, that they're giving you that 20 or 30 minutes or an hour, they're giving you a piece of their lives.

Maina Mwaura:

And so I really do hope one day William, when we have more pastors who we're interviewing and doing journalism, to be honest with you, just because I think people do want that. And so what I'm with people from Janie Elliott to Jimmy Carter, to Sandy Patty coming up here to Evander Holyfield, most people do want a sense of that when they read your bio, pastor or minister, they want you to bring that to the table. And so I really do think if you're a minister of the gospel, if you're getting into this or doing this, be pastoral.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, it's interesting. If you look at how Jesus interfaced with people, a whole lot of that time was spent asking questions. And a lot more than given directives. And I watched generation Z, and this could be a whole nother podcast, but how do you communicate the gospel in the new day? And I think you're going to see more and more preaching happening through interviews.

Maina Mwaura:

Yes, I do too.

William Vanderbloemen:

And because it's more dynamic, it's more interactive and it's more in a position of helping me understand. Which you have done such a good job of today as we're trying to understand what we don't understand and figure out what we don't know and I keep telling my team, we're going to trip while we do this, but we're going to keep moving forward and just try like never before.

Maina Mwaura:

I love what you guys are doing. I still remember right after the whole COVID hit, man. When people are really trying to figure out what to do, William, at that point in time. Even in journalism, they're trying to figure it out at the same time. I can still remember getting that first email from you guys going basically, Hey, let us help you walk through this. And I [inaudible 00:25:35] my friends going and they get it, man. They really get it in the sense of that you guys didn't know all the answers. I mean, I love how you guys are authentic about that. That you were willing to walk church leaders through it, was a good thing. So thank you for that.

William Vanderbloemen:

Oh, thank you Maina. And I am always thrilled to interview somebody that has a name that's harder to pronounce than Vanderbloemen. It's really awesome. Makes me feel a little more normal.

Maina Mwaura:

You know I forgot we both have hard last names. Thanks William.

William Vanderbloemen:

What's the origin of Mwaura?

Maina Mwaura:

Oh man, William, it's weird. It is Kenyan. And so my dad gets here to America, William, through a Greek Orthodox priest, man. So for 10 years we were Greek Orthodox.

William Vanderbloemen:

Huh. So were you born there or here?

Maina Mwaura:

I was born here. And so I was baptized at that point in time William, I mean, into the Greek Orthodox church.

William Vanderbloemen:

How about that.

Maina Mwaura:

Which is crazy, looking back at it. I was just talking to that priest a few months ago and he was just, it was just interesting to hear the story all over again.

William Vanderbloemen:



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That's great. Well, I appreciate you making time for us, man.

Maina Mwaura:

Anytime William.

William Vanderbloemen:

If you are listening today and you want to read some of Maina's coverage, we're going to have all the links in the show notes to his writing. And if you're not on the email list for that, just go to [Vandercast.com](#). And if you all give us your email address, we won't beat you up with other emails, but we'll send you show notes. Let you know what's coming down the pike in the near term. So Maina, God bless you, man. Thank you so much. Appreciate you being with us.

Maina Mwaura:

Thanks William.

Anna Baker:

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