

Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership podcast. This episode is part two of our podcast series, where we're sharing the stories of senior pastors who transitioned to a new church in the midst of a pandemic. In this series, we're talking with ministry leaders who were brave enough to take a 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 were shut down, social distancing kept us apart, and there was an immediate shift to online operations.

Speaker 1:

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 and to practice.

Speaker 1:

In today's conversation, our founder and CEO, William Vanderbloemen talks with Philip Miller, the senior pastor at Moody Church on tips for leading a new church through unprecedented waters. Phillip shares the real challenges of undergoing a transition during this turbulent year, tips for relating to your congregation even in a virtual environment, and how to see trials as an opportunity to fully grasp and appreciate Christ's all-sufficient love. So without further ado, here's William's conversation with Philip Miller.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, Hey everybody. Welcome to the podcast today. You're in the middle of our brand new series. We've titled it a lot of things. One of the working titles was "I got to my new church and so did the pandemic," and I'm so blessed to have my friend, Pastor Philip Miller with us today. Philip is the pastor at the Moody Church, which is by nearly every measuring stick I can find, the oldest mega church in the United States and also the longest running mega church in the United States. So they've had mega church standards for a long time. That means they were the first to do a lot of things. Like I want to ask you, Philip, in and little while about answering machines and Bible studies for kids and some of the cool things that church has done over the years.

William Vanderbloemen:

But you guys were the first church I know of, and I think maybe the first church in the country to actually hold a business meeting to elect a new pastor in a virtual setting. And so I thought it'd be cool to talk to you. I'd love for you to just share a little bit of your story. We've known each other for several years now. And then let's talk about what you're learning as you're pastoring a new church in unprecedented waters.

Philip Miller:

Well, that sounds like a fun conversation, William, and it's great to be here with you and your listeners. And yeah, I remember that was weird. This whole thing started back in March. That was when we came out to candidate here at Moody and it was funny. The pandemic kind of had hit, and we were about a

week and a half into the first initial lockdown that was happening kind of all over. Different cities were taking a lead.

Philip Miller:

I was coming from the West Coast and so the airports were just dead. I remember I got on a plane on a Wednesday and there were 12 people on the plane. And they didn't have first class, so that was a bummer because I would've snuck up there. But it was crazy. Just came on out here, and yeah, we did everything virtually. So we had a meeting with the elders. That was in person. But then the Moody Church has kind of a leadership council, sort of an intermediate layer of leadership, that needed to vote on me. So we did that on Friday and that was all virtual. It was weird, camera-driven, and they used Survey Monkey to like collect and tabulate the results, which is crazy.

Philip Miller:

That passed. And then on Sunday we had a congregational meeting and there were hundreds and hundreds of people live streaming an interview and my preaching, and the room was completely empty. And we had the vote and everything went through. But it was the weirdest thing. Because when it was all said and done, and I had said yes, and they had said yes, and all that sort of thing, I'd still only met like 50 people at the church. So it was crazy. It was so weird.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow. So take me from March til now we're recording this in December. So you get nine months. Your whole honeymoon has been virtual.

Philip Miller:

That's a depressing metaphor, a virtual honeymoon. Who wants that?

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah.

Philip Miller:

Certainly, you have sort of expectations that it's a sweet. This is the second sort of a pastoral transition I've done. And that first year is just a sweet time. You know, everyone's excited. So I get cards and I get emails and I've met a few people. But it's not the same thing as being in the room.

Philip Miller:

We have stayed virtual. So one of the difficulties we have is we're right in the urban core of Chicago and Chicago is handling the pandemic pretty carefully. So there's pretty stringent restrictions in place here. And so one of the things we're just trying to think through is, okay, how do we reopen a 3,800 seat auditorium in downtown Chicago? That room doesn't feel very alive until you have about a thousand people in it. So just having a couple of hundred people doesn't work. So we'd had to keep the services virtual for now. We think that's the best way to love our neighbors.

Philip Miller:

But as a pastor, it is definitely a frustrating reality to week after week, just look at a camera. It clicks on, clicks off and you kind of go home. You don't get that immediate feedback or sense of connection with the community. And that's been really limiting.

William Vanderbloemen:

I used to have a hard enough time when I was at a wonderful Presbyterian church, but fairly traditional church, the early service tended to draw, I would call them our introspective congregants. Like I could preach, preach, preach, and they were good people. They were taking it all in, but I couldn't preach without some feedback. Have you had to learn new skills for preaching when you're not getting feedback from faces?

Philip Miller:

Yeah. I'm extroverted, so part of my process is I'm reading the audience. I'm playing off the energy in the room. So it is hard. You get up. You look at that camera, and you just kind of have to bring effort to the moment and just kind of power through. Because you don't get the feedback. You don't get the reinforcement. You don't have energy coming back that you can sort of feed off of. So that's very limiting. Part of me is just learning, "Okay. That's how that feels. It just feels like that."

Philip Miller:

I noticed early on there's kind of a wall about 15 minutes into my sermon. I could feel the energy. Like that's as far as I can sprint energy-wise, and just recognizing that wall is going to come and not to lose confidence, but just to kind of like plow through it and keep going. Yeah. That's been a new skill set.

Philip Miller:

Another one is when you tell a joke or something in a live environment, you wait for the reaction. Then you find out, did the joke work? Did it not work? Did I bomb it? And then you have to clean it up if you bombed it out. All that kind of stuff. But now it's like, I'll do a joke, but I can't pause and leave room for laughter, because there may not be any. And so it's funny. I think my jokes are a little more subtle and I might just have like a little half smile acknowledgement or like a little moment, but then just keep going. Right? Because you can't leave space for those things.

Philip Miller:

So I think I've also maybe adjusted a little bit of my communication. I recognize people are seated. They're probably sitting on their living room couch. They're with their families. It's so much less church sort of feel and more of a living room feel. So I think I've tried to adjust my preaching to be a little bit more conversational in this season as well. So those are some of the micro-adjustments.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah, well, and it would be negligent on my part if I've got the pastor of the Moody Church here to not talk about how you've treated the text and has that changed. Like I would imagine you had a plan for, first year I'm at a new church I'm going to preach on XYZ. Has that shifted? Have you found yourself doing different sermons? Are those series different? Are you going through a book of the Bible? Is the length of the message different? Walk me through the art of treating the text during this time.

Philip Miller:

That's a great question. So when I was getting ready to start here, I started July one. My first sermon was July, I think it was the fifth. Right before, I'm sorry right after 4th of July. And so we were trying to figure out, okay, how do we launch this? You know? Normally you sort of want to come out of the gate with energy and just sort of start with a bang.

Philip Miller:

But I was just feeling this incredible weight of the pandemic. If you remember, it feels like a year ago, or a world ago. But at first we thought it was like two weeks. Remember that? We were like, we're going to flatten the curve, and by April, by Easter, we'll be back.

William Vanderbloemen:

Surely Mother's Day.

Philip Miller:

Surely Mother's Day. That's right. And then all of our expectations got throttled and things started dying one at a time, right? So Easter sort of died, and then Mother's Day died. And then Father's Day died. And then 4th of July sort of died. And I realized, we're grieving. We don't have a good label for it, but nationally and worldwide, we're going through collective grief. And I thought, we've got to help people grieve. You know, the grief cycle starts with denial. Then it turns angry, and then it's bargaining, and then it's depression.

Philip Miller:

We were going through all those stages. If you think back over the summer, and the nation, and the outrage, and the anger, and the politics. We were grieving as a people, but we didn't know what to do with it. And so I sat down. I said, "Okay, I need to help people grieve."

Philip Miller:

So what we did is we went to the book of Ruth in the Old Testament, and we walked with Ruth and Naomi through their grief, and trusting in the Providence of God. That he had a hope and a future for them, and that he could redeem their stories and their pain. So that's how we started, which was sort of not the way you would normally think about starting. I'm going to start my brand new pastorate in a series on grief. But it felt right for the moment that we were walking through. So that's how we began.

William Vanderbloemen:

I listened to several messages in that series. It's so well done. I think what I appreciated most Philip was I heard in your voice, your own grief. Maybe I'm over reading, but it sounded like you were trying to let, "Hey, I'm grieving this too." I'm starting [inaudible 00:12:02]. Is that the case?

Philip Miller:

Totally.

William Vanderbloemen:

If it was the case, do you have any tips for how to share without oversharing in those kinds of ways.

Philip Miller:

Yeah. Well, it totally was sort of my own therapy in public. Because I was detaching from a ministry family that I loved, a staff community in Washington state that I had pastored for seven years. That's where my friends were, and that's where normalcy was. That was our house. That was our kids, and their school, and their friends, and all the normal things that we would normally run to. In the middle of a pandemic when the world gets crazy, you kind of run home and you have a stable place. But we didn't have that either because we were moving, you know?

Philip Miller:

And so I think, yeah, for me, I was going through grief and I think that probably helped the maybe emotional intelligence in the communication, just recognizing that's where I was at. So carrying the weight of that helped me.

William Vanderbloemen:

Let me park there for a minute. What did you go? Where'd you find like home when you're at a brand new home? Because I'm guessing there are listeners who are in a brand new ministry, are feeling a little alienated, and there's nowhere to run to, so to speak. Tell me about your journey and what we might learn from it?

Philip Miller:

Oh man. Well, I don't know that I did it all particularly well. But I think it comes down to, I think of a foundation of a house, not one that's on a slab, but those pier and beam foundations, where you have these fixed points where you drill down to bedrock. Right? I think in life we tend to have, I don't know, 10 or 15 pylons that we're driving down and we think they all matter. But about 95% of them really don't. Like they feel stable, but they're not.

Philip Miller:

So I have my health, but you won't always have your health. I have my family. Well, I won't always have my family. I have my job. Well, I won't always have my job. I have my community. I won't always have that. Right? So I think in a pandemic, some of those pylons, they get wiped out. Then you have all this weight that you've been placing on those things, and you have to transfer the weight to something more durable.

Philip Miller:

And of course we know theologically that Christ is our foundation, right? He's the rock. He's the firm foundation. He's the one who never leaves us. Never forsakes us. Never lets us go. His word is trustworthy and true, and his love is absolute and durable. But we don't learn that, how all sufficient his love is until other things get stripped away. And I think in this season for me... You know, when people change jobs, it's usually just the job. They don't change their house. They don't change their church community. They don't change their skills. But when you're a pastor, you change all that stuff at the same time.

Philip Miller:

And when you do that in the midst of a pandemic, you change even more things. I think this season has been one where we, Christa and I and the kids, have felt like almost every single one of those pylons got wiped out. We had some friends, some mentors, some close people that we obviously pull close to and

we lean on, and we have family. We have those supports. But in many ways, it's a season where we've just learned that God is faithful and he's enough, and that he will hold us and keep us.

Philip Miller:

A little anecdote. I was talking to my 10-year old daughter, her name is Claire, the other day. This was probably a month ago. We were talking about Thanksgiving coming up, and things that we could be thankful for. And she said this to me. She said, "Dad, I'm actually really thankful we moved, because when I lost all of my friends and had to leave them behind, I discovered I have a friend who I will never lose. And that's Jesus."

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow.

Philip Miller:

And you know, as a father, just like my little tear in my eye kind of moment. Right? I was like, Wow. I mean, she's 10, she gets it. Right? And I think that's been the core of it for me, William, is really we're learning the sufficiency of Christ. Of course, having relationships like mentors, and friends, and other people to lean on has been invaluable. Extended family, that sort of thing. But more than anything, we've discovered that Christ is enough.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow. Wow. It'd be interesting to see church attendance for places that are open is not anywhere near where it was year ago. But it'd be interesting to see where spiritual maturation is once we're able to see each other again, because I'm guessing that's a story that a lot of people will be able to... I mean, our family devotions have been better than they've probably ever been in the last nine months. And that's on me as a dad, but you know, when your kids are watching the news and you just see them when they watch the news. You can see the news is trying to create enough terror to keep you watching. That's the point, whatever news channel you listened to. And you sit down at the dinner table, you'd better have some hope. So, yeah, that's super, super helpful.

Philip Miller:

It's interesting. You know, James, in James chapter one, talks about trials that come into life. They're like stress tests, right? You get on the treadmill, and you find out how your heart is. The stress test of life comes along, and you find out what's going on on the inside. It reveals where we're at. And so I'm in agreement. I think there are people who are going to come out of this pandemic with really deep roots in Christ and a deep trust in him. And there's going to be people who come through this pandemic and they find themselves more uprooted than anything else. So there's going to be a lot of spiritual work on the backend of this, I think.

William Vanderbloemen:

So talk to me a little bit about your brand new congregation. You can't go meet people. How are you engaging? What are some things that work, or don't work even? That'd be more helpful How are you engaging?

Philip Miller:

We've had to do a lot of one-directional communication, right? Lots of videos, lots of content, lots of pushing things out. I think people in general feel like they know me and my family pretty well. We did little interviews of the kids, and we posted those online. We did family videos. We did devotionals. We've done lots of one-way communication. That doesn't help me as much, but I feel like it allows people to feel like they know me. And that's huge.

Philip Miller:

We've really leaned into our prayer time. On Wednesday evenings, we do a church-wide prayer, kind of YouTube and zoom prayer time. We've even done a few of those in person, outdoor, socially distances and all this stuff. A couple of weeks, we had outdoor services. We had six of these. We had to limit them to a hundred apiece. Actually I think there were eight. There were eight of them, four on two separate weekends. So eight altogether. And it was kind a get to meet Philip and his family. We stood there and we got to meet people. You know, all of it's inadequate, but it's better than nothing. So we've been leaning into those things.

Philip Miller:

It's been kind of cool on our staff. Because we can't get large groups together, I've been doing a lot of one-on-ones and connecting with people. That's been pretty healthy and good, and allowed me to get to know people. Then we've been connecting with families kind of one family at a time, which is interesting. Because normally what you would do is you'd do a big reception. You'd meet 650 people, and shake their hands, and forget everything you learned, because it's just overwhelming. Right? It's almost better because the expectations are, well, we can't do that. So it's got to be slow, but it has to be much more personal. And so in a sense, I almost like it better because I can actually get to know people, family by family. It's just going to take forever.

William Vanderbloemen:

It will take forever. A line that I've stolen recently from a headmaster of a school I was watching give a presentation, and he said, "Let me just ask for your forgiveness on the front end. This is my first pandemic."

Philip Miller:

That's right.

William Vanderbloemen:

By his grace. Immediately I was like, "Oh, yeah, it's my first pandemic too. You're right."

Philip Miller:

Yeah. Everybody understands that.

William Vanderbloemen:

Yeah.

Philip Miller:

What is weird though, and I've just realized this, is like your first year in a ministry, you're just trying to experience everything for the first time. Well, how do we do things? What's this like? I'm going to have

to go through that twice because this first year is unlike any other year in the history of Moody Church, right? So at some point we're going to be rebooting and rebuilding things that everyone else remembers, but I've never experienced.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow.

Philip Miller:

And that's going to be weird because whenever we do that, it's going to be the first time I've ever... I may have been here two or three years, but it'll be the first time we've done this event, which is just a weird reality.

William Vanderbloemen:

Wow. Wow. Anything you've tried that hasn't worked? You're like, "Hey, learn from my mistakes."

Philip Miller:

You know, I don't know that we've had any catastrophic failures. I think what our attempts at reopening, we have a lot of Sunday schools and small groups, and we've had people gathering in homes. We've had people gathering in regulated classrooms with they can only be in this space and they have to leave through this entrance and that sort of thing. So we're trying to leverage our facility that way.

Philip Miller:

I think that's been a mixed results. I mean, I think people were really excited on the front end. They're like, "Oh, let's get together." Then we did have some COVID that outbreak in some small areas. So then we had to throttle it back. And I would say that's kind of a mixed bag. We're trying to do the whole hybrid thing, where we're doing some in-person and some online. And honestly that's hard to do well on both fronts. But we're learning, and we're getting better. But I think we're all doing that right now. Right? We're trying to figure out what does this look like, and how do you keep doing ministry in a really weird time?

William Vanderbloemen:

Forgive us. It's our first pandemic,

Philip Miller:

It's a good line. I'm going to steal that. Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

I know. It's so interesting recording this in December. I was thumbing through YouTube, I mean YouVersion this morning, looking for another advent devotional idea for the kids. And I ran across Christmas in Lamentations. Never in my life have I heard that.

Philip Miller:

You paused, didn't you? You were like, ah, maybe I should do that.

William Vanderbloemen:

I actually started it. I'm doing it. It felt like that's actually a really good thing. But I think we're all just kind of figuring it out as we go. And I'm guessing a lot of people are going to have to go to a first post in the next year, and it's not going to be the same for a few years. So any advice to people that are getting ready to make a move, or don't even know it yet, but might make a move. What would you say to somebody entering a new place when it's just different than it's ever been?

Philip Miller:

Yeah. I think calibrating expectations is huge. I'm kind of a romantic by nature, and so I can kind of visualize like, "Oh, this'll be great." And then it's not going to be great. Not everything's going to be great. I think when you make a career move or a pastoral move, there's a natural excitement, right? A fresh start, new ministry horizons, new people, new opportunities. All of that's really, really good. I think just recognizing it's not going to feel normal. It's not going to be normal.

Philip Miller:

But in that there's a huge opportunity for leadership, right? Because everyone is in the same stew of, I have no idea what to do. And so in that vacuum a leader gets to shape the future and say, "Here's what is important right now." And I think the role of shepherding our staff, our leaders, we're all hurting, we're all running on fumes. We're all grieving. We're all exhausted. That's everyone. And the strongest people you know are probably the most exhausted people.

Philip Miller:

And so as a leader, just I think recognizing those feelings are going to be in your life and they're real, they're normal. And we've got to build ourselves up, right? I've got my bicycle here behind me in my office. I get on that. I ride and it's good for my health. And I have to be very disciplined about that because I don't feel like it. But we have to be healthy, and we've got to keep enduring and play the long game. Because one day this pandemic will end, and one day the church will come out of the shadows. And things won't come back to normal. They'll come back to whatever the future is.

Philip Miller:

But what we do know is that Jesus is building his church. Even now. The gates of hell will not prevail against it. And so there is a beautiful thing that Christ is doing and I want to be there for that. I do think this is a giant stress test on the church and on our character, and I do think the Lord is using this to make us stronger, more resilient. And we will come out positioned to do some really cool things.

Philip Miller:

So it's a huge opportunity, and so I would encourage leaders is to lean in to this space and recognize it's going to be awkward. It's going to be weird. It's not going to feel like you would expect it to. But we need to lean in, in a season like this and play the long game.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's really good. I think what resonated with me most in what you said was realize it's not all going to be good. And I think what I'm hearing from leaders of churches is realize that all of your people are not going to think it's good. You can do all the right things in the world. The passage that came to my mind recently that I can't get rid of, I believe it's an Ezra. It's around the third chapter. So this is when the

second wave of exiles are coming home from captivity, right? They come back to Jerusalem, the temple has been rebuilt, and the new temple is smaller than what the exiles remembered.

William Vanderbloemen:

They get there, and of course they're just all torn up that there's this little mini temple. It's not what it used to be. And I think pastors are going to have some of that. And then you've got people that were so excited that there was a temple and they're like, "Yay, we got a temple." The verse that haunts me in there says, "And they cried aloud out of sorrow," because of this small temple, "and the shouts of those praising and the cries of those crying were mixed together in a noise that was heard all through the land." And I'm like, "Oh wow, that might be the noise we're all going to hear for a while." It might be this mixed bag. And I don't, it came to mind when you mentioned that.

Philip Miller:

Yeah. It's Paul's language, sorrowful yet always rejoicing. O Holy Night has that line, "The weary world rejoices."

William Vanderbloemen:

Oh my gosh. If I had a nickel for everybody that started their advent series with that line.

Philip Miller:

Yeah.

William Vanderbloemen:

It's my favorite really.

Philip Miller:

Yeah. But that's this year. It's a weary year.

William Vanderbloemen:

And just a word of encouragement to pastors. I mean, you guys know this, but yes, it's a weary year. But you know what? The weary world that saw Christ come into the world, hadn't heard God speak in 400 years. We'd been through nine months.

Philip Miller:

There you go.

William Vanderbloemen:

Right.

Philip Miller:

I was talking to somebody the other day and someone was like, "This year is just the worst." And I paused for a moment. I was like, "Not even close. Not even close." You know, when you look back over, I mean the Black Plague was way worse, right?

William Vanderbloemen:

Killed one third of Europe.

Philip Miller:

Yep. And wars, and civil Wars, and discord. And just the world has dealt with havoc for many different seasons. This is just the one we were in.

William Vanderbloemen:

That's right.

Philip Miller:

And God is faithful in these things just like he always has been.

William Vanderbloemen:

Well, I keep getting thank you notes from your congregation for whatever small role we played in helping you guys find each other. So you must be doing something right there. People don't take time to write notes to consultants unless they're bad notes. So way to go for being there. You can't feel that connection from the notes we're getting, but you should know that your people appreciate you, and you're doing a good work.

Philip Miller:

That's awesome.

William Vanderbloemen:

I just want to thank you in the middle of the time where pastors are working harder than they've ever worked. They're burning out, and here you are cutting out time to talk to us and help an audience adjust as they might be moving. So thank you, Philip. We really appreciate you and your ministry.

Philip Miller:

Well, it's my pleasure. I'm glad to do this. And again, probably therapeutic for me just to do this with you. So thanks for letting me.

William Vanderbloemen:

Absolutely. And those of you listening, there are other episodes in this series. I hope it's helpful to you. We've kind of done a new strategy for '21 where we're dropping series, like Netflix. We're not doing just the once a week thing. I think the pandemic taught me that. So check out some of the new series that we're putting out this year. And if you want to get show notes to learn more about Philip or the Moody Church and what they've done, then just go to vandercast.com and subscribe there. And we'll be sure to send you some good information. So thanks again for being with us and hope to see you soon.

Speaker 1:

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.

This transcript was exported on Dec 09, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

Speaker 1:

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