

Beth Moore ([00:03](#)):

You know, here's how I feel about it. What are they going to do? Come get the ministry? You know what I'm saying?

William Vanderbloemen ([00:09](#)):

Yeah.

Beth Moore ([00:10](#)):

If it closed the doors today, we've ministered for 35 years. They can't take Jesus from me.

William Vanderbloemen ([00:16](#)):

No, that's good.

Speaker 4 ([00:17](#)):

We realign our resources, our time, our money, whatever we have, around what we see God doing.

Speaker 5 ([00:24](#)):

I tell our team when tragedy strikes, our greatest days are ahead. God's going to use this amputation of finances or staff or reputation or whatever happens.

Speaker 5 ([00:34](#)):

You know, Jesus said in this world, you'll find tribulation. It's hard to do ministry.

Holly Tate ([00:42](#)):

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast. I'm your host Holly Tate, vice president of business development here at Vanderbloemen. Today we bring you our once a month series called, How God Built This, where we talk with Christian leaders to find out the ways that God has moved in their life to build their organization. On today's How God Built This episode of the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast, our founder and CEO William Vanderbloemen, talks with Chris Hodges, the founding and senior pastor of Church of the Highlands. Now before we get too far along, we want to thank the team at Twelve:Thirty Media who produced today's episode. Twelve:Thirty Media can help you transform the worship experiences at your church. So you'll want to check them out today at [twelvethirty.media](http://twelvethirty.media).

Holly Tate ([01:26](#)):

Now, Chris Hodges is the founding and senior pastor of Church of the Highlands. Since it began in 2001 Highlands has grown to have over 20 campuses across the state of Alabama. Chris has also co-founded ARC, which is the Association of Related Churches, in 2001, which has launched hundreds of churches across the United States. He is also the founder and chancellor of Highlands College, a ministry training school that trains and launches students into full-time ministry careers. William and Chris talk about how God gave him the vision to launch Church of the Highlands after a season of depression, what they faced as a portable church in their early years, and the establishment of ARC, the Association of Related Churches. Tweet your takeaways from today's show using the hashtag [#vanderblast](#) and check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group where we post behind the scenes content. We'll even post today's show notes and a behind the scenes video in the Facebook group. Without further ado, here's William's conversation with Chris Hodges.

William Vanderbloemen ([02:30](#)):

Well hey everybody, thanks so much for joining us today. And wow, one of the best parts of my job is this monthly podcast of How God Built This. And today we have pastor Chris Hodges with us and Holly told you a little bit about pastor Chris. He's truly one of God's amazing men in the American church. And let me tell you, I get paid to have an eye for talent and apparently I don't have a very good one.

William Vanderbloemen ([02:58](#)):

Pastor Chris, you probably don't remember when we met. We met at a golf tournament John Maxwell was hosting. Probably what? 15, 16 years ago?

Chris Hodges ([03:10](#)):

That's right. And I do remember it. It was a great time.

William Vanderbloemen ([03:12](#)):

Yeah. And John came over. John's mentored both of us and clearly John's mentoring works better on some than others because you've done well. But John pulled me aside and said, "William, I want you to meet a friend of mine. This is Chris Hodges." Said, "Oh hey, how you doing?" And the way I remember the conversation, it was something like, Chris is getting ready to plant a church in Birmingham, Alabama. And I'd pastored in Montgomery at a previous church and I said something like, "You ever live in Alabama?" Nope. "You got any family in Alabama?" Nope. "You got any friends in Alabama?" Nope. And I think I said something like, "Well good luck with that." And-

Chris Hodges ([03:53](#)):

That's exactly what you said.

William Vanderbloemen ([03:56](#)):

What idiot says that to Chris Hodges? So not much of an eye for talent, but man, it's been great to see what God's done through you and through Highlands and we're just so blessed that you're here today.

Chris Hodges ([04:07](#)):

Well, I always tell people nobody's more amazed than I am, and that's the truth William. I still just about half the time I pull onto the property, tears still come to my eyes and I can't believe I'm living the life that I'm getting to live. Now I had this little sign on the side of the stage that I had put. Now at every one of our campuses has this on the side stage. "It's a privilege to be on this stage, thank you for choosing me." That's the way I feel. I don't feel like I earned it. I don't feel like I'm the best. I just feel like in the sovereignty of God, he just reached down and as Paul said, the least of these, and just picked me. I'm still very, very grateful that I get to do what I do.

William Vanderbloemen ([04:50](#)):

Wow. Well, I know you've told it a million times before. You've got a heart for church planters. This monthly installment mainly is me wanting to have fun hearing great stories because I've now got a little bit of an idea. I haven't started a company. But I would love for people who are listening who are like, "I want to start something. I want to start something for God. I want to start a church or a business," tell us a little bit of sort of the birth narrative of the church and some of those early days. I'd love to just hear what God's got to say.

Chris Hodges ([05:18](#)):

Well, I was 18 years now in this church plant. I guess you could call it still. But I was 18 years before that, an associate pastor. I always felt like I was going to be the best number two guy on the planet. Never had any aspirations or dreams to have my own church. A year before we launched, I went through an entire year of depression. When I look back, I don't think God caused it, I think God used it to get my attention. But I think kind of like the eagle does. When the eagle tries to get the eaglets to leave the nest, all they do is pull out the stuffing, that makes nest uncomfortable. And that's kind of how I felt. I was in a very good place, my home church in Baton Rouge. But just uncomfortable in every way. Our church always did 21 days of prayer to start the year. 21 days of prayer and fasting.

Chris Hodges ([06:12](#)):

And in the year 2000 I really just took that very, very serious. Did a total fast. Just really seeking God, thinking honestly William, that I was going to have to go get medical help for my depression if this prayer time did not work. And on the 17th day I had an open vision speaking on a stage. I saw the building, but I didn't know the city. And so after the 21 days of prayer was over, I went and spoke with my senior pastor. He's still my pastor, Larry Stockstill. And I said, "Let me tell you what I saw." And he said, "Chris, it's time for you to be a senior pastor." And I said, "I don't even know where to go ... I don't even know what the next step in that is." And William, he said some of the most important words that I share with other people who are wanting to start something.

Chris Hodges ([07:04](#)):

He said, "God will give you supernatural love for a city. Don't leave until you have supernatural love." And I said, "Define that for me. What do you mean by supernatural love?" And he says, "You'd be willing to buy your burial plot in it. You'll have a love for it. You'll want to spend the rest of your life there." So Tammy and I took our vacation time in May of 2000 to go to cities that we thought we could buy our burial plot in. Just cities we thought we'd love. We had about eight cities, all in the Southeast, on the list. And long story short, they all slammed shut in our face in very dramatic and in ways that unmistakable except for one. And that was ... It seemed like everything we touched in Birmingham turned to gold. We'd meet people. I mean, I'd get on the phone and say, "Hey, Tammy and I are getting ready to move." Before I'd even get finished the conversation, the person would say, "I have a friend in a city called Birmingham if you ever decide to go there."

Chris Hodges ([08:05](#)):

It was kind of weird, things were happening like that. And we didn't know anyone in town and we didn't know how to plant a church and we didn't have any money to do it. And so in fact, we laugh and say in those days they had what they call the y'all go ahead ministry. You know, where they just lay hands on you and say [inaudible 00:08:22].

Chris Hodges ([08:25](#)):

Because there was no ARC, there was no church planning, there were no books, there was certainly no money. And so we decided in the fall of that year, we would move to Birmingham and set a launch date for the first Sunday of February of 2001. And in about four months, I had 34 people who wanted to help me launch the church. And I had about \$75,000, is all I had. And most of that was mine that I just cashed out everything, retirement, sold everything I could sell. And 400 people came to the first service on that first Sunday of February, 2001.

William Vanderbloemen ([09:03](#)):

That's good.

Chris Hodges ([09:04](#)):

And of course now the rest is history. But it was a big leap of faith. I don't know anything that God does that's not going to require that. Without faith, it is impossible to please God. He's just going to require that. And I think it's because he loves it when we're dependent upon him. He'll often ask us to do things that are out of our comfort zones and what feels too big for us. That was certainly one of those things and of course has been one of the best decisions of my whole life.

William Vanderbloemen ([09:37](#)):

So this is how old school my church that I attend is. I teach an adult Sunday school class. I didn't even know they still have those. And so I was teaching on Abraham and Isaac recently and it struck me. At least in my life, this is true. It seems theirs too. That the really great temptations don't happen when we're walking by faith with nothing. It's when we have everything.

Chris Hodges ([10:01](#)):

Right.

William Vanderbloemen ([10:03](#)):

It seems to me.

Chris Hodges ([10:04](#)):

Oh, exactly. Exactly. And it was that for us. And of course then the phone started ringing off the hook after we had what was considered in that time period, a successful launch. And people wanted to know what did we do and how do we build the team and how did we raise the money and what did our mailers look like? And that's how ARC began. We just got a couple of guys together and said, "Hey, why don't we help other church planters do this same thing?" And so it's been a fun journey.

William Vanderbloemen ([10:33](#)):

You just dated it a little bit with what did your mailers look like?

Chris Hodges ([10:36](#)):

I know right. Now it would be what was your Instagram posts? But exactly.

William Vanderbloemen ([10:44](#)):

What was a successful launch? What did y'all have and then ... Don't you launch and then you go through a little Gideon's revival where it slows back down?

Chris Hodges ([10:52](#)):

Yeah. Back in those days, and really honestly still today, 400 people on launch day would be very successful. And that's still true today. What we found out, William, is that there is critical mass that has to be attained for the service to have the energy that's needed. And what we learned in our studies is that really the number one reason why there was almost a 90% failure rate of church plants back then ...

Now that's closer to like 40% will survive, 60% will fail. That's kind of where it is today. ARC's numbers by the way, are 93% success rates. But the only factor you could find that attributed to the success was the size of the launch.

William Vanderbloemen ([11:37](#)):

Wow.

Chris Hodges ([11:38](#)):

If they were launched large, they could survive that initial attrition that you're talking about. Which there's usually almost about 50% attrition. So to get to 200 you have to have 400 on launch day. And that was our goal because we knew if we got below two we were in trouble honestly. So that's why the whole marketing goal was toward getting at least 400 on launch day. And that's even what we do today with ARC still with our church plants, is that we try to get them to at least 400 on launch day to survive the natural attrition that takes place in the first few weeks and months. And so they can have enough critical mass to be successful. It's very similar, by the way, to small business. It's almost identical by the way. So it's not the quality of the product in the business world, it's how funded it can be on the front end to get it into kind of a big bang, so to speak.

William Vanderbloemen ([12:30](#)):

Wow. Interesting. So one thing that's happened to me since I started this Sunday school class ... My pastor asked me to do it, so okay, fine. I'll just do it, it doesn't matter. But I found ... I'm a recovering preacher, so I babble. But I had forgotten. We had a big old first Sunday and then we had the ... You know, it went down like a church plant and it started to come back up. And then out of the blue we had a really bad Sunday and I got depressed. I'm like, I hadn't felt this in forever. I forgot all about this. I mean, did that happen to you in the early days? Did you-

Chris Hodges ([13:03](#)):

Oh yeah. We were two months in in the school we were using. We were in a thousand seat fine arts theater. Says, "You can't be in here for the next three Sundays. We're going to put you in the cafeteria." A church with day old french fries on the floor. Oh gosh, yes. And I thought, this is not going to work. Then you have your first spring break where I learned everybody in Alabama has a lake house. And no one was there. And then we had our first summer. So, yeah, there's a lot of enduring that goes on, especially in that first year. It's very similar to birthing a baby. It requires minute by minute, hour by hour care and you have to feed it. It's going to grow up and be able to take care of itself to some degree later, but you really have to ... It's like an infant. We say it's birthing a church plant. Truer words have never been spoken.

William Vanderbloemen ([13:58](#)):

If we're past the things you hear at a conference and you get down to ... You have some down days when you're planting something and it's not growing like you thought it would. I think most entrepreneurs or senior pastors think it's going to be bigger than it really is at the beginning. What affected you more? Was it nobody's showing up or we can't pay the bills? And how'd you deal with whichever one of those was?

Chris Hodges ([14:26](#)):

Well for me, it was never the bills because of the model that we were piloting that we now use with ARC. And that is, I had a church sponsor that was going to make sure we were going to make budget for the first year. So Greg Surratt and Seacoast Church offered me what is now the model that ARC uses. We're going to get you through your first year. Finances won't be the reason why you don't succeed the first year. So we actually not only help them with the launch budget, but we also help make sure that every month budget is made. And so I had no pressure. Honestly, I had no pressure there. The pressure was everybody's new. Everybody. And they don't know if you're for real or not. Everybody has to hear your vision.

Chris Hodges ([15:13](#)):

There is no leadership. There's no infrastructure yet. There's no offices. There's no counseling center. There are no women's conferences. You have nothing and you're trying to be a full service church when you really don't have what you need to do that yet. So it's sharing the vision in a compelling way that keeps people on while you're building all these things that was the greatest challenge. But honestly, the most fun too. I felt like I was at Disney World the whole time. I was having more fun figuring it all out. The offices were in the basement of my house for three years. And I now look back at it, those were some fun times. Honestly, it requires an attitude of, you've got to just see it as all positive. It's kind of like having a baby. Yeah, you're going to lose a lot of sleep, but aren't they cute? So it's getting in the right mindset, I think, to launch a new church.

William Vanderbloemen ([16:16](#)):

So you launched the church, you get through, and having lived in Alabama, that spring break and summer thing is real because they have lake house at spring break, but then they go down to the panhandle of Florida in the summertime.

Chris Hodges ([16:25](#)):

Exactly.

William Vanderbloemen ([16:26](#)):

I went to John Ed Mathison, who was at Frazer Memorial and Jay Wolf at First Baptist, and I said ... This was 1999, so long before things were happening. I said, "Why don't we rent the gym down on 30 A, and you take June and I'll take July, and you take August and we'll just split the offering because they're all going down there anyway."

Chris Hodges ([16:50](#)):

Exactly. Oh no, it's very, very real. And I'm grateful for what Seacoast offered me. And really that's our model today. We're going to take this pressure off of you so you can stay focused on developing leaders and having great weekend services.

William Vanderbloemen ([17:06](#)):

I've heard you say before, you got to get through your first summer. So you get through that first summer, you've launched this thing, you had 400, it goes down, it comes back up. Where was the next major, oh my gosh, I don't know what to do? Was it size or staffing or, oh my gosh, I don't know what's next? Where was the next place in growth that you were scratching your head?

Chris Hodges ([17:34](#)):

I don't know that I was, I don't know what to do. It was a more of a, I don't know how this is going to happen. I knew what to do. I knew we had to get eventually out of a portable situation. The tension for us was, how long did we stay portable before we lease something or own something? That was a real tension point for me. Because if you do it soon, you can end up in a longterm lease that doesn't meet your needs because you outgrew it. So there's nothing worse than, oh, I think we're going to be a church of 400 so you lease something 400 then you grow to 4,000 and you're stuck with a lease that you don't need anymore. I didn't know where it was going. I didn't know what the size capacity was going to be.

Chris Hodges ([18:08](#)):

So thank God we made the decision to stay portable almost seven years.

William Vanderbloemen ([18:12](#)):

Wow.

Chris Hodges ([18:12](#)):

And saved a ton of money. We saved 16 million in the first seven years. That's how much we had in the bank so that we could go build what is our first facility, which ended up being 2,400 seats. Well in hindsight, thank God we stayed patient because there were many ... Especially on the days when the custodian of the buildings slept in and didn't open the doors for you on a Sunday morning or they forgot to turn the air conditioning on. We've got to get out of here. We've got to have something we can control. And it was very tempting, William, to do that prematurely.

William Vanderbloemen ([18:50](#)):

How many were coming to worship when you finally started building your-

Chris Hodges ([18:54](#)):

Well when we moved after six and a half years, we had about 4,500 people attending. And then when we moved into our first permanent facility, within three months, we had doubled. We went to 9,000 in three months. That was the biggest oh my goodness, look what ... We were all shocked. That was one of the biggest moments of the church.

William Vanderbloemen ([19:18](#)):

I know enough about your church to know this probably isn't true. But I've heard Rick Warren say, "Stay portable as long as you can. Cause as long as you're portable, people come to church looking for ways to serve. And once you got a place, they want to be served." Did you find that as you move into a structure that you have to change the heat around volunteerism or did you experience any of that?

Chris Hodges ([19:40](#)):

Well, we didn't because we kept opening new campuses. Today we have 22 locations and we're still adding locations across Alabama. And then we're in 20 prisons every Sunday, which requires a massive volunteer base to pull that ministry alone off. So because we have this growing edge, I think you'd be right, had that been the only location we would have had. But because we still had vision and we were growing in other areas, we never experienced that.

William Vanderbloemen ([20:11](#)):

Mm. So let's talk about staffing a little bit. Because I think people that start up ... Well, if they're listening to this podcast, they're probably worried about staffing a little bit because they got to me somehow. But you guys have had a real knack for not needing to call me, which is great. It's awesome. I see churches like Hillsong, same sort of deal. It's like we're going to raise up from within and everybody wants to raise up from within. I'm all for it. You know. Now I'm from deep in the woods of western North Carolina, kind of near where they filmed Deliverance, you know?

Chris Hodges ([20:45](#)):

Yes.

William Vanderbloemen ([20:45](#)):

So I tell people I've seen it and constant inbreeding doesn't end well. You need some outsiders every now and then. But I don't think enough people know what the first thing to do about raising up a new leader from within my house is. What would be some just starter advice for, hey, you probably have that staff person already around you, do These three or four things and to start cultivating that?

Chris Hodges ([21:07](#)):

Well, I'll have to tell ya. I do have a leadership eye. I walk in the room and that's what I see. So the bad part of that is, I can walk in a room and overlook need and people who need care. And that's where I have to discipline myself. Because when I walk in the room I can spot potential and that's who I'm looking for. And honestly, William, the thing that I do is I do it every day. Every day I recruit. Every day I develop. Every day. I just left a meeting where I had six of my senior leaders and I spent about an hour pouring into them. Every day I recruit. Every day I develop. We have a college at our church with over 1100 students. And every day I'm looking for the ones that I'm going to hire even out of that college. Every day I recruit. Every day I develop.

Chris Hodges ([22:00](#)):

When I first started the church, one of the first things I did is put together a men's bible study that met in a public library at 6:30 AM. It grew to about 70, 80 business leaders. Well, I've hired three out of that group. But I raised them up. I poured into them, basically outlined John Maxwell books and just taught them leadership. But really what I was doing was seeing the ones that I have a divine flow connection to and see ministry potential in them. And many of them have taken pay cuts to come do ministry jobs, but they're highly capable, high capacity leaders. But the thought that I had that I think I could pass on to your listeners is, you can't think one for one. If you need one position, you don't go look for one person. In my mind, if you have one position, you go look for 30 people. It's a farm team concept, like baseball does. I mean they may need one position, a new shortstop, but they have three levels of teams that they can call up to fill that one spot. It's a farm team system and that's the way I think. We have right now about 30 potential campus pastors to find our next campus pastor.

William Vanderbloemen ([23:19](#)):

That's awesome.

Chris Hodges ([23:20](#)):

Developing 30 to find the next one.

William Vanderbloemen ([23:22](#)):



I did a fascinating podcast. It's been a few years ago. With a guy I think you probably know, Darren Patrick.

Chris Hodges ([23:29](#)):

Yeah, sure.

William Vanderbloemen ([23:30](#)):

And for a while he was the chaplain of the St. Louis Cardinals. And he told me that the ownership of the Cardinals developed the farm system. I don't know if he's told you this story, but they figured out, well heck we can teach anybody baseball but we can't teach character. So we're going to find people with character and then teach them baseball. And that's kind of the cradle of how the whole farm system started.

Chris Hodges ([23:50](#)):

Wow.

William Vanderbloemen ([23:51](#)):

Yeah.

Chris Hodges ([23:52](#)):

I totally think that's the right mindset. Because Jesus had a team of disciples and one of them didn't work out so well. So even as-

William Vanderbloemen ([24:03](#)):

He was good with money though.

Chris Hodges ([24:07](#)):

As perfect and holy as Jesus is and was, you still end up with people. Had he only disciplined that one disciple, maybe the story would have been written a little bit differently. But thank God he raised up more than one. I tell that to pastors a lot because I think they get too one focused. And so I don't think it's the right way to do it.

William Vanderbloemen ([24:33](#)):

Well and where I see people trip up is, I'll hear them say, that's my guy. That's my guy. That's my guy. Let me tell you something, chemistry's seasonal. Ask Barnabas who his guy is. Used to be Paul, then it wasn't. And there's no good guy, bad guy. So I think have multiple options. So you grow to 4,000 and then you go to 9,000 and then you start this multisite thing. Did you have a lot of roadmap for that or were you having to kind of make it up as you go?

Chris Hodges ([25:01](#)):

I did have a roadmap. In fact, I had served five years on Craig Groeschel's board at Life Church.

William Vanderbloemen ([25:08](#)):

That's a pretty good roadmap.

Chris Hodges ([25:09](#)):

Yeah, exactly. So he had me come in to ... They rotate an outside pastor every five years just to get a fresh set of eyes. And I served a five year term for that church and learned so much. I still credit much of what ... I probably wouldn't have even tried some of the things we tried had there not been another church that inspired it and kind of were the pace setters for it. So got to attribute a lot to that. But they gave a lot of us the confidence that, you can do this. And of course again, the rest is history. Here we are. And it's so true. So I really wasn't afraid to try it. Of course we'd set ourselves up two things. And I tell pastors this as well. Every leader, even business leaders need to know this. You've got to create margin in leadership and in money. You need to train more leaders than you need. You need to have more money than you spend. If you do that, opportunities are everywhere. You can step into opportunities if you're prepared in leadership and in finances. Those are the things I always keep. Even to this day, I tried to keep Church of the Highlands healthy enough in those two areas so that if God brings us an opportunity, we can step into it.

William Vanderbloemen ([26:30](#)):

Well, I was talking to a pastor this week who said, they've hit, I don't know what it was, 12,000 in attendance or something like that, which is a huge, huge, huge church. I said, "What are you thinking?" He said, "You know the most common question I get is, what's the three year plan or where are we going to be in five years? And I've told my staff, quit talking to me about plans. Let's talk about being positioned to take opportunities.'

Chris Hodges ([26:51](#)):

Yep.

William Vanderbloemen ([26:52](#)):

And I think that's the future, as fast as things are changing. It's not lay out the plan. It's be ready.

Chris Hodges ([26:58](#)):

And as John Maxwell says, "When opportunity knocks, it's too late to prepare." So you have to have prepared before the opportunity, not when you get the opportunity.

William Vanderbloemen ([27:08](#)):

You know, talking about John, I remember he told me ... Oh gosh, this was probably back in 2001 or two. I mean, it was long time ago. I said, "Where do you think the future the church is going?" He said, "William, by 2050 there'll be 50 churches in the United States with attendance of over 50,000." And of course this all got to be symmetrical with John or it wouldn't be John. But 2050, 50 churches, 50,000, okay. I thought it was crazy. Well, it may happen. It may well happen. But you guys, whether it's you or Craig or one or two others, are really on the front edge of that. And as I've done ... The thing we're trying to build is a fairly new idea for churches. There's not really a roadmap. There's sort of one with old search firms in the corporate world. But what I find is where I earn my keep as the leader is oftentimes having to make a few decisions a year with no map, all gut or holy spirit or prayer or whatever you going to call it. But it's intuitive and they're decisions no one else wants to make.

William Vanderbloemen ([28:14](#)):

And I'm forever trying to figure out what's a good way to know if it's my gut or the bad fajitas I had the night before? Have you had to make those kinds of decisions in Highlands? Walk us through one of those and how you figure out is this God speaking to me? Is it the right thing or is it just what seems right?

Chris Hodges ([28:31](#)):

Yeah. So the way I like to think of it though is you don't know all the time. In fact, most of the times you don't know. But you have to take just the next step. You don't have to take all the steps. That's why they call it a step of faith. And I do think sometimes step three can't be seen until you step into step two. And then when you're in step three you won't see five but now you can see four. And so he just lights up the next way. And I think as I look back, it's really a series of, okay, I don't know if I can commit to step 10 in step two, but I can go ahead and go to three. I'll take another leap.

Chris Hodges ([29:11](#)):

And I think looking back, that's what we were unafraid to do honestly. Is just, okay, let's step into this. Classic example. You wanted an example. I wasn't convinced that we were supposed to have a ministry college. Now I've always loved young leaders, but I know what's involved. I know facilities can be in the billions. I know that scholarships and endowments and just faculty and accreditation, those are not small things. And so honestly, I'd actually taken a step, I felt like, back. I was like, wait a minute. And God brought this incredible opportunity to us in the form of a facility. It's an unbelievable story how it even became available. That only made sense in our economy and in our church for it to be used as a college. So I said, well, let's just take another step toward that. Didn't even really fully commit. And then some other things happened where John Maxwell got involved and said, "Hey, I feel called to help you raise money for this college." Okay. So then there was that confirmation. I think that's how God works. I don't know if you ever get all the steps clearly in front of you, but he will light the way of the next one. And you just step into that one and then light moves to the next one, if that makes sense.

William Vanderbloemen ([30:43](#)):

Totally. I read one time ... I read it on the internet, so it must be true. I read that when you know when David said, your word's a lamp to my feet, the kind of lamp he was talking about was actually a little lantern you wore on your foot and it didn't light up more than about one step.

Chris Hodges ([31:01](#)):

Exactly. And that's what it feels like. But it's easier to steer you when you are moving. So if you're standing dead still and God turns you in a different direction, you're still in the same spot. But if you're moving, even if you're moving slightly, not in the right direction, he can turn you and you're in, you're moving. And honestly, I can hear no's louder than I can hear yeses. Didn't Paul say that? He goes, "I'm going to Jerusalem not knowing what's going to happen to me there." That's a leap of faith. He says, "I only know that the holy spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me." So he knew. But he also obviously had some fear that he had prison and hardships facing, but he had to take that leap and of course made a great impact in Jerusalem.

William Vanderbloemen ([31:54](#)):

As you guys have grown ... I think I know the answer to this, but I'll ask it anyway. It seems like as well as our company has grown, we've gotten to a level of, hey, we're actually not going to have to think about our budget at a monthly status. We can actually do an annual budget now. We can hire people. We can

do benefits. As we've hit these new growth phases, I feel a temptation or a proclivity of the organization, maybe it's me, to get comfy. And to start resisting change. I even said the other day, we've never done it that way. I almost threw a rock at myself. So I think that happens to a lot of teams. Has that happened to you guys? And when it has, how have you battled it? I've always had to just inject some change in chaos.

Chris Hodges ([32:47](#)):

Yeah. Definitely, we've had it. In fact, two times in the history of our church where really money and growth went flat. It's never gone down, but it went flat. And honestly it's both times, what's in common with both of those is that I was under visioning myself and the church. Of course in my mind that comes with the time I spend with God and my dreaming. I do a message now for pastors called Dream Again. In Mark chapter eight, the guy that was blind, when Jesus laid his hands on him, he says, "I see people that look like trees." Well, how did he know what trees looked like unless he had his sight at some point in his life and he lost it? So he wasn't blind forever. He knew what trees looked like. And he knew what people looked like and he knew the difference. So he says, I see that. And then the Bible says once more Jesus put his hands on him and then he saw everything clearly.

Chris Hodges ([33:45](#)):

I think you have to have a bunch of once mores. I think when we get a vision we have, we have a tendency to like, okay, I've got my vision. But no, no, no, no, no. He's a God of the once more. He'll put his hand on you again and give you a fresh vision or a new project or a new emphasis. So I value those now that I'm getting these once mores from God, where I can see things clearly.

Chris Hodges ([34:11](#)):

We've only been doing prison ministry the last six years. Before that, I would have told you we were never going to do that. But I had a once more and saw that clearly. Again, I never would've dreamed we would actually be getting accreditation status to actually have accredited ministry degrees. In fact, I told you, I don't even know if the church can do this. Well, but again, we had that moment. So I think it's a very important ... Praying and fasting and seeking God, stirring up your spirit man, getting vision from God. I always say that God doesn't have a speaking problem, we have a hearing problem. He loves to talk. He loves to share what's on his heart. When the outpouring of the spirit happened in Acts, chapter two, the result was prophecies, dreams, and visions. He said, "This is what a spirit filled living looks like. Prophecies, visions and dreams. I'm going to give you insight to how I see the world and then allow you to see it as well."

William Vanderbloemen ([35:15](#)):

Wow. Wow. That's good. I was studying James recently for a lesson I was doing and there's that verse, I forget which translation. It says, "Get rid of all the moral filth in your life." Well that's a hard verse to market with, right? You're not going to do a billboard that says that. So I started looking around and I've found, there's a secondary definition of the word moral filth in the Greek and it's earwax. And I thought, now that's really interesting. Bad behavior prevents the ability to hear. Bad behavior prevents the ability to hear from God. So it's the prayer and the fasting and all that.

Chris Hodges ([35:57](#)):

Exactly.

William Vanderbloemen ([35:58](#)):

You can't hear you. Your ears are stopped up. So it's so interesting how often the lessons I hear from people who've built great things for God just go back to the fundamentals. Hey man, just stay close to Jesus. You'll hear from him.

Chris Hodges ([36:11](#)):

Oh, that's why we have 21 days of prayer to start the year fasting. I am more clear on the voice of God while I'm fasting than any other time. That's a fact. It is so clear. It's unreal sometimes. And so, you obviously can't fast all the time or you'd die, but man, the clarity. When you separate yourself from ... I always say this, to hear God's voice, you got to turn down the world's volume. You've got to find places that the world is just too loud. It could be in your social media use. It could be in ... I'll go through weeks of just fasting the news. Honestly just so I can get out of my mind, just what's going on in everyday secular world. And it's always clearer hearing from God when I do.

William Vanderbloemen ([37:02](#)):

Well we're recording this episode the day after the Houston Astros lost the world series. So today I have tuned out the news because I don't want to hear about it. And I can tell you firsthand it works. It turned down the noise.

Chris Hodges ([37:18](#)):

Exactly.

William Vanderbloemen ([37:19](#)):

Tell me what the once more is that's going on right now. What do you sense God doing at Highlands for the next chapter?

Chris Hodges ([37:28](#)):

Well where I'm most alive right now and where I just can't stop thinking about it is helping other churches. I feel like I'm stepping out of kind of building years and into ... And I'll use this word loosely. But kind of more legacy years. I don't feel like it's about me honestly. But I know just age wise, I'm approaching 60 very soon here and I feel more like a father than a brother. And I'm enjoying the role honestly. And I love coming alongside of pastors who just need some encouragement or maybe need a tool. And I feel most alive when I'm doing that, William. So I love consulting. In fact more than preaching, I'd rather sit in a office with some of the lead staff of a church and help them solve some problems. And so for me, that's where I sense the aliveness of the spirit in my own heart. That's the once more right now. So I'm asking myself what that looks like for me. I think I will always be here in Birmingham and always a part of church of the Highlands. But I'm not sure the role will look the same as it has up to this point.

William Vanderbloemen ([38:43](#)):

Well now you've just teed things up because you know, all I do is succession.

Chris Hodges ([38:49](#)):

Exactly.

William Vanderbloemen ([38:50](#)):

All I got's a hammer and you look a lot like a nail right now. What are you guys thinking? I mean maybe that's going too deep, but how are you going to handle succession?

Chris Hodges ([39:04](#)):

Well, if something happened to me today, God forbid, something tragic happened to me, I mean, we are very well equipped with the leaders that we have. I'd like to think that it wouldn't miss a beat. Of course there would be months and months of mourning the loss. Maybe even years, you never know. We have a strong stable of men and women who can lead exceptionally well. I'm not afraid of that. And so we have a succession plan that we haven't made public, but there's no timetable. I'm trying to set it up for the lord to be able to do it today or in 20 years. It's up to him. But we have begun the process of preparing the organization for that.

William Vanderbloemen ([39:56](#)):

When did you begin the process? How old were you when you started the process?

Chris Hodges ([39:59](#)):

50. Six years ago.

William Vanderbloemen ([40:01](#)):

Really?

Chris Hodges ([40:02](#)):

Right when I turned 50. Because everything I've read about succession ... I know you know this. The ones who do it well do it over a long period of time.

William Vanderbloemen ([40:10](#)):

Yes. What do they say? The number one rule of negotiation is the person with the most time wins. And I think that's true of this succession planning way.

Chris Hodges ([40:20](#)):

Well, and so that's what we did and I've done. And because I don't know what the end looks like, I have to prepare for every possible scenario. And we've been able to do that.

William Vanderbloemen ([40:31](#)):

That's great. So pretend with me that you're starting over or you're getting to sit down with yourself years ago and you want to look at the younger version of you and offer a little wisdom. Let me save you some stupid tacts. What are the couple things you'd share with a younger version of you?

Chris Hodges ([40:51](#)):

Looking back, the thing that has empowered all of this are my relationships. So I would be even more intentional about building them. The best part of my life now are my relationships. I feel like I dropped the ball as a parent a few times, getting so focused. And it bit me hard, be honest with you. All my kids love the Lord, love the church, have great marriages, but it hasn't always been a smooth road. And at

least two times it was my fault. And all I did was just take my eye off the ball. I didn't do anything wrong. I just didn't do anything right. And I just got distracted and kind of took for granted that it would kind of be where I left it. And it didn't stay where I left it. And so I would go back and be way more intentional.

Chris Hodges ([41:45](#)):

And here's the thought. Not even good at it, but good at it every day. Just again, not taking my eye off the ball, staying in the game every day. And it wouldn't have been that hard to do. So it doesn't require a lot. It just requires intentionality. And so, yeah, I'd love to go back and have that over again. But thank the Lord God's gracious and so are my children and my family and everybody's again, like I said, doing exceptionally well and I'm grateful. But we could have avoided probably a couple of bumps in the road.

William Vanderbloemen ([42:26](#)):

That's good. That's good. And boy, I could sit and talk to you for hours, but you're a busy guy and I appreciate what you've given us. I'd love it if you would, just kind of before we finish, speak a word of encouragement over people that are trying to get something started right now because it's not easy work.

Chris Hodges ([42:45](#)):

Yeah. My word of encouragement would be there is no substitution for the presence of God on your life. It says of the disciples, that they were unschooled ordinary men, but people took note that they had spent time with Jesus. And I don't think people take note at your ideas or your sermons or the quality of your product, whatever it might be. I think they take note that something's on your life. Take note of that you're carrying something that has presence connected to it, and you can't get that except by spending time with God. So what I am still improving on William, that I'm going to actually teach in 2020 to our church is mastering your mornings. I don't know a leader who's not a master of their mornings.

William Vanderbloemen ([43:38](#)):

Yes.

Chris Hodges ([43:40](#)):

They know how to feed themselves, feed their mind, feed their spirits, spend time with God, and has some Holy moments. So my encouragement would be don't let the pace be determined by the world, your phone, the needs around you. Master your mornings. Master that time before the Lord and get the presence of God on your life. And honestly, it's kind of like the tithe. When you honor God with that first part, it blesses the rest.

William Vanderbloemen ([44:14](#)):

Yes.

Chris Hodges ([44:15](#)):

And it's true with your time as well.

William Vanderbloemen ([44:17](#)):

Mm. I heard, I think it was Brendan Manning say, and you probably heard this, "Daily time with the Lord is like manna from heaven."

Chris Hodges ([44:27](#)):

It is.

William Vanderbloemen ([44:28](#)):

"It comes every day. And it with the Dawn."

Chris Hodges ([44:33](#)):

It's so true. So true.

William Vanderbloemen ([44:34](#)):

Yeah. Well, Pastor Chris, thank you so much for making time for us and offering a word of encouragement. Your story is an inspiration to everybody out there and I'd love to go back and talk to that guy at the golf course where I met you and say, "Just don't say anything. Just don't say anything."

Chris Hodges ([44:54](#)):

I love you, William. You're a blessing, man. We appreciate your role in this world and in the body of Christ.

William Vanderbloemen ([44:59](#)):

Well, thank you my friend.

Chris Hodges ([45:01](#)):

Okay, buddy.

Holly Tate ([45:02](#)):

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