

Holly:

Welcome to the Vanderbloemen Leadership Podcast. I'm your host, Holly Tate, Vice President of business development here at Vanderbloemen. On today's episode, our founder and CEO, William Vanderbloemen, talks with Pastor Greg Holder, author, speaker, and the lead pastor of The Crossing, a multi-site church in St. Louis. William talks with Greg about his book, *The Genius of One*, and the importance of unity, collaboration, and culture, especially through times of crisis, which is so applicable right now, as we're all facing COVID-19. Greg's book, and this conversation, provide an encouraging roadmap for forming impactful relationships that fulfill our purpose as Christ followers. Tweet your takeaways from today's show using the hashtag, *vandercast*. And check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group, where we post behind the scenes content. We'll post today's show notes and a behind the scenes video in that Facebook group. Without further ado, here's William's conversation with Pastor Greg Holder.

William :

Well, hey everybody, so glad you could join us. I want to do a podcast today, not about Corona. I felt sorry we're recording this on the 7th of May, and as many of you know, I live in Texas, so day before yesterday was Cinco de Mayo, and it was not a good day to have a company named Corona, even with Cinco de Mayo. But with all the information overload, we thought, "Why don't we just go ahead and go forward with one of our regular podcasts?" Today Greg Holder's joining us, as Holly told you. Greg, thanks so much for joining us.

Greg:

It's my privilege to be with you.

William :

Yeah. You're in St. Louis?

Greg:

I am, I am.

William :

And people who've been there would know it, people who don't would think, "Oh, it's just a city," but actually you guys have parishes and you're divided into different counties, and it's just a little bit different scene. So talk to us a little bit about that, and before we go into the not Corona part, just how you guys got ready, and what you're facing and thinking?

Greg:

Yeah. Well, it's interesting that you would say that, because it is a city, not unlike other cities that have a great Catholic tradition, and it is a parish mentality. And then on top of that, major geographical divides with rivers. You've got the Mississippi River, you've got the Missouri River, you have these other major rivers. And so, we're carved up a little bit, in different counties and sections, and as a multi-site church, we end up being in all of those different places. So you are both figuratively and literally trying to bridge gaps. And as you can imagine, there are certain kinds of mindsets and certain kinds of people that just tend to want to live in certain areas. So that, we were used to. But now here we are in this next phase of whatever we're in, and the reopening strategy for the various counties is going at different paces.

Greg:

So we had one County executive that has just said, "Nope, we're done, that's it. We're opening this thing up." And the county where we are in, St. Louis County, it is still very much a, nine person or less gatherings, you wear the face masks. If you're not essential workers, then don't be getting out. So I talked with one of my campus pastors this week in that other county, and he said, "It's like the Wild West out here, where everybody's out there and loving it." And then here we are, in a completely different setting. So it's just another wonderful reminder of just, we have to find what we have in common. As followers of Jesus, in this church environment, if we can't find what it is that flows between us, that unites us, we're toast. And so it's caused us to go back to some of the basics, which is just fine with me.

William :

Well, and just so people understand your setting. We spend a lot of time with churches of many different sizes, and the normal size church of a hundred or so, with a sanctuary is probably the right word, that seats three or 400 or so, social distancing isn't that big a deal. And a worship service in a normal sized church is not a super electric, wired to the ceiling thing, but you're in a very modern worship setting. And what, do you guys touch 8,000 people?

Greg:

Yeah. That's about right, in physical attendance, and like everyone else, it's that online attendance, it's such a mysterious, vague number, but yeah. 8,000 in person is a good number.

William :

Yeah. Yeah. So that puts you in about one of, well, fewer than a hundred, probably fewer than 50 churches in the country. And so it's just a different ball game for you guys, but you saw this coming a little bit. So, we were talking beforehand that a couple of weeks before this happened, you read the tea leaves and said, "Hey, we need to probably get a taskforce." I'm telling people all the time, Greg, I want to visit about a few things, but I think leadership in the next season is really not going to be about seeing a year or two ahead of time. It's going to be about seeing a couple of weeks ahead of time. So, how do you go about reading those tea leaves? What are you paying attention to that's giving you the insight, I think you told me, your staff said, "What are you talking about? You're crazy." So, walk us through a little of that story and then how you sense things a little bit early.

Greg:

Yeah. Well, I feel like one of my jobs, as I'm sure every leader that listens to this podcast would agree to, one of my jobs is to climb the tallest tree I can in the woods and see as far out as I can, and then come back down and say, "Okay, I think we're going to veer this way. I see some things out there that you may not have seen yet." And so, that means you're paying attention to all these things that, if you go back and you look at some of the headlines that were starting to rumble in Asia, and then in the Pacific Northwest, I started checking with some of my friends in the Seattle area, which was the first place that was really feeling it. And I just had this gut check of, "Huh. Okay." And I'm not a doomsday prepper. I'm not one of those guys, but it was a moment where you want to anticipate the problem before it's a problem.

Greg:

And so I just remembered saying to our senior team, "This will seem a little silly, and it may be premature. And if we don't need it, cool, it just gave us a chance to work a problem down together. But could we start to imagine what this is like?" And then as it began to encroach really on the rest of the country, we started off with just, "How do we mitigate this in our large gatherings?" And it immediately became apparent to me that I needed to pull together a task force, which included some people connected to local government and principally led by some physicians and medical personnel here locally, who also have connections with folks in DC.

Greg:

So all of that just began to inform us and what we were thinking and anticipating. And I remember one night on the phone with some of the physicians, three of the physicians on a conference call, and it just became apparent to us, "Okay, we're going to shift to an online experience only." And this was the week before the President announced a national shut down. And so we just began trying to help our folks to understand, we're not doing this out of fear. We truly are doing this out of love. It is a Christlike thing for the strong to take care of the weak. And let's make this shift for the most vulnerable in our community. And folks, they bought into it.

Greg:

Now at that time, they had no idea how long this thing was going to be. And we still don't. Right? That's the frustrating thing about this. I told folks last week at church, "Marathons are an amazingly difficult thing, but at least you know where the finish line is. At least you know when you hit mile 22."

William :

That's right.

Greg:

Where does this finish? And so we just began to lean into each other and say, "How do we keep collaborating through as we go into this now?" And so I'm so grateful to just have a team that we collaborate. I know that word gets overused, William, but it really is a part of what I love talking about and helping churches to figure out, but we collaborate. And so we kept bringing our questions and ideas together and yeah, the Lord led us towards something, as he did many churches, it's been so cool to watch so many churches, of various sizes and styles, make and navigate this term. God be praised, what a cool thing that people have adjusted. And isn't that just a joy, let's not forget that. I hope there's some muscle memory on the backside of this thing where we can keep doing this.

William :

Yeah, no kidding. And that is a beautiful segue to, I want to talk about your book that came out earlier this year, *The Genius of One*. And why don't you give folks just a quick overview of what the book is? And I love to hear, Greg, having written several books, we have seven kids, I'm yet to give birth to any of them, but what I hear my wife describe about labor reminds me of how I feel about writing a book. So there's got to be some really big burden in me to want to write a book. It's not-

Greg:

Yes.

William :

So, what was that burden and what was the big message God gave you for this book?

Greg:

It's a perfect question, because the only way this book was birthed was out of a burden. That's just spot on. In the prologue, I talk about how I remember driving home from church with my mom and dad, I'm like six, seven. I totally remember this night. And we were driving home. Mom's at the front seat, dad's driving. And I remember her turning in tears to my dad and asking him, "How can Christians treat each other this way?" And we had just come out of one of those horrible, from the denomination of my childhood, they were called business meetings. And it was just a horrible thing where people were treating each other so poorly. And, William, I'm telling you, I remember as a small child, I tell this to the church. I remember saying, "Listen, I'm with you, Jesus. I'll do whatever you want me to do, but your church stinks. It's broken. I'll go because I'm required to go."

Greg:

And that began a long journey for me of really never, I don't have any sordid past or anything like that, I didn't take a hard left turn, but I did hold the church at arm's length for a long time, because I never saw people doing it the way Jesus wanted it to. So now you fast forward to John, chapter 17, which is the premise of the book. It's the worst night of Jesus' life. It's after the Last Supper, he's dismissed Judas. He knows that he's on the clock. It will not be long before Judas finds him. And he knows time is of the essence. And in John 17, he prays for us.

Greg:

Okay. So the clock is ticking and Jesus prays, what does he pray? You know this, he doesn't pray that we would be cool, or innovative, or the most technologically savvy, he doesn't pray that we'd be powerful or rich. He prays that we would be one. That we would be one as he and the Father are one. So somehow we're supposed to reflect Trinitarian love in the way that we interact with other and champion each other, and we serve each other and submit to each other. Jesus said that's the goal. Why? So that the world may know that the Father has sent him. So it's as missional as it gets. That's the bottom line foundation of the book. I wrote it out of a vow that I just wanted to be a part of someplace that was different. And then the rest of the book is what I call nuts and bolts. It's just different aspects of, what does unity look like? Because when you say unity, it can be almost so squishy a term that people, it's almost too sentimental-sounding. That people-

William :

Oh, listen, man. I came out of a mainline church, well, the Presbyterian church, which I loved, and I didn't know how dysfunctional. Every church is dysfunctional, right, because it's made of people.

Greg:

Exactly.

William :

Though it had become so polarized as a family, that the evangelicals and the church didn't like the word unity, because it carried baggage toward other things, the other side or whatever you want to call it, was pushing that we felt were not in the best interests of the church. So it's amazing how a word can get loaded like that.

Greg:

Yeah. Yeah.

William :

I wonder, where have you seen during Corona? There's this thought that maybe the polarity in our culture has dropped a little bit. Are you sensing that? And if so, where do you see yourself trying to build on that in the future?

Greg:

Right. Well, so first of all, the old sins persist, and they're going to lurk there in our world. You read headlines today and it's like, oh, yeah, those are familiar old evils that find their way back into the culture. And they'll take new and subtle forms, even in our churches. But I do think you're onto something when you're saying maybe there's a window here, of time where we could pay attention to how we're doing it differently. So if we are to reflect, somehow, the mystery of the Trinity, by the way we work together, which is a pretty tall order. Part of that is, we understand that there's more to the one in the one. So there's one God, but somehow in the mystery of the Trinity, there's more to the one in the one.

Greg:

Okay. Then you fast forward to the New Testament. And Paul says, it's one body with many parts. Okay. So we're going to be these many parts, with different passions and ideas, and we're going to somehow work together as one. I think William, and one of my just great joys is talking about this in a variety of settings around the world, is that it's not just inside the walls of a church where people are to work together as one. We are to work together as one across denominational divides, church and para church, big church, small church, suburban church, urban church.

Greg:

And I am beginning, in some ways, to see some partnerships form, even if it's out of necessity, that it's reminding people, "Oh, this is what we were made for." Because I've never come across someone who, when you enter into that, even if it's out of panic and it's out of necessity, and, "Oh, can you help us with this?" I've never had someone on the back end say, "Gosh, that didn't feel good at all." Every time it's like, "Oh, why don't we do this more? Why don't we check in with each other more?"

Greg:

And so I'm hoping as we see some of this happening, I'll give you a specific example, because of our online infrastructure, we made that turn online easier than some churches in a more traditional setting, or churches with less resources. So I asked our guys, I said, "Will you just please keep thinking of how we can collaborate with people outside our church?" So they started offering webinars, everybody's doing these kinds of things, and it's just so beautiful. But then they tell me later and I didn't know this, and it just made me laugh out loud, it was so cool. They said, "Hey, we didn't really sign off on this, but we've given all of our gear that we're not using. We're just giving it to people here locally who needs something," and I'm like, "Yes. Now we're talking now, now we're acting like we're on the same team." I hope, to your point, that we don't forget how to do that 18 months from now.

William :

Well, I think it may be the biggest challenge for the American Protestant church in the next 20 years, is the idea that we can actually work together. Not that it's not been a challenge before, but I read an interview with Tim Keller the other day, and don't you want to just be as smart as he is, just for five minutes? Just five minutes, that's all I need.

Greg:

When I was pitching this particular book, I will not mention the publisher, my agent and I were having a meeting and they said, "We want you to take this book and just, can you put more?" And I forget what word they wanted. And they said, and this is a direct quote, they said, "Because we think you could be like a Tim Keller." And I spit my coffee out, because it was a conference call, and I literally laughed out loud and I said, "Oh, you guys don't know me very well at all. You have completely missed the mark here." So yeah, I'd like to be as smart as Tim Keller.

William :

Tim's interview, he was being asked about the big challenges the church faces, and he said he thought polarity, and cultural polarity. So, I don't hear anybody arguing over theology anymore. We certainly aren't talking about, who's going to get kicked, and they're left behind, and who's going to get, that's not the, but there is a rising, especially with the millennials and gen Z, the assumption that the evangelicals are red, and liberals are blue, or non-evangelicals. That's all going out the window, and the divisions that may happen are not to be lost. And so I thought about that, and I thought about my office, which is 70% millennials, and what I'm learning, I'm not old enough to be their dad, I'm not young enough to be their buddy. And so I'm having to figure this out. How do I, everything I read about millennials, they want collaboration. So give me some tactical, I have to lead a team that needs more collaboration. What have you learned to tapping into this genius of one, as a leader?

Greg:

Well, you're inferring it even by your language. I think one of the essential ingredients, spent a whole chapter on it, is, shocker, humility. We have to get to a place where we have what Paul says in Philippians 2, where we have the mind of Christ, where we are willing to say, "We're going to set our agenda aside, and we will come in close." So if you're going to lead millennials, if you're going to champion millennials, and help them find a path for their future and for their development in career, you have to trust them. You have to give them things that they, go, "Here, you do this," and you need to listen to them. Which means part of what we do is we go, "Hey, I don't know how to do this really well. What do you think?"

Greg:

And so it's this mutual back and forth of trying to figure out what is it that we both bring to the table. And I will tell you, every time it is a risk. Every time. It is a risk for the person who is holding on to, let's say more control, in the organization. It's a risk, but it is a huge risk for a young person, millennial, gen Z, I don't care. It's a huge risk for anyone on the other side of it, when you're in that collaborative moment, to go, "All right, should I share my idea or not? Are they going to blow me out of the water? Are they going to ignore me? Is somebody going to make fun of this?" And it is a great, wonderful, tender, beautiful, powerful moment when those risks are taken.

Greg:

One of the chapter titles is, At One Point, all of our Movies Stink, and that's a cleaned up quote from the guys at Pixar, who began to discover what creative collaboration looks like. And so they, this was early on, so we're talking the first four or five huge movies, Toy Story, and those movies, and these five, I think it's five, different directors at Pixar would get together occasionally and pitch their movie, pitch their idea. And then the other guys, directors, gals, would begin to make them think differently about it and challenge and help them. And it was that whole iron sharpening iron thing. But it really is that moment where you go, "Yeah, you know what? At the beginning, sooner or later, my movies stinks. I need you to help me with it." And you will not get there. You will not get to a place where, Paul is talking about the body working together as one, if there isn't an inherent humility, and awareness, and a confession of, "Oh, I can't do this by myself."

William :

Well, I think you're farther along this path than I am, because the struggle I have is when I open myself to collaboration and I hear the ideas others have, I'm like, "Your idea stinks." And how do I get past that part to the, "Okay. What if God's doing something creative here?"

Greg:

Yeah. Well, no, let me help you with that. I am not further along. I'm telling you, that's the gold standard. That's what we're wanting. On a good day, here's what I would say on, a good day at our place, we can begin to approach that, but it is an ever-elusive, always, it's like anything else in leading an organization, you never arrive. You're always moving towards it, but it's so important.

Greg:

So Jesus prayed this for us on the worst night of his life, when the clock was ticking, how did we forget that working and loving together as one? How did we forget that, that was it? That that's what we're supposed to be about. And to go back to what Tim was saying, though, they won't put their finger on it, this is what younger generations are aching for.

William :

Yes.

Greg:

And when they see it and taste just a little of it, it begins to, the whole idea of Christ becomes more winsome to them. Now you're peeling away some of the myths and some of the bad stories that are in the water. But this is what they're longing for, now we're right back to what Jesus prayed. Now we're on mission.

William :

That's good. I think one thing I'm finding, and I don't know if you've had this struggle as well as, I'm having to do an internal communication audit every day for myself, where I ask myself this question and I lose more than I win. "William, today, did you give more directives or did you ask more questions?" And I'm trying to get to where I, and I'm stunned at how often Jesus answered questions with a question.

Greg:

Isn't that something? Yeah.

William :

I don't think he's, so I'd love to hear you talk about this, because I don't think that whether it's millennials or just people who love unity, I don't think people want unity just for unity's sake. In the Presbyterian church, we have nine ordination vows, and they're actually pretty well done. One of them says, "Do you promise to further the peace, purity, and unity of the church?" And you can't do all three of those things at once. It's impossible, this side of heaven. So talk to me about how you have strong opinions and yet get into the job of being unity and the genius of one?

Greg:

Yeah. Well, okay. So I think there are some myths out there that I think I want to try to blow up on, and they're in no particular order, but I'll give you just a couple of them. So, one of them would be, as long as we're getting the important things done, it really doesn't matter how we're getting it done, because it's really, the goal is the goal. And I couldn't disagree with that more. In fact, one of the ways that we say it is, how we do what we do matters as much as what we do. I think how we do what we do is as missiological as what we do. I am not saying that what we do doesn't matter. It clearly matters. But I think that's one of the things where you start, and I think that's the beginning of bad culture in an organization, by the way.

William :

Yeah. Absolutely.

Greg:

People start tolerating things, and then it leads into the next one, which is, it's not really worth focusing on because nothing will ever change. Well, if we're the people of God, we should be all signed up for the idea that people can change, that there is the wind of the Spirit blowing through us. I'm not saying it's easy, but there is something about this that we need to pay attention to.

Greg:

But one of the things that comes up often when we're talking with people, and it comes up in my own life all the time, whether it's that internal dialogue, or things that are falling out of my mouth, but it is the idea that words matter. It sounds so simple and so obvious, but the words that we use matter, there's a reason that all throughout the Proverbs, you can pick just a number of them where our words have the power of life and death. Our words can build someone up. They can tear someone down. Paul just reiterates this again and again and again. So to me, what's a sad thing is, that sometimes our words have become the weapon of choice for many Christians against other Christians. We'll talk all about those evil sins, that you're not supposed do, this, this, this, or this. And yet we have tolerated this weapon of choice, where we're inflicting harm on others. And it's simply not Biblical, it's not of God.

Greg:

And so I think, as we move into these collaborative moments and we begin to develop new habits, one of those habits is paying attention to how we're saying things and what we're saying, but you already nailed it. There's a heading, I think, in the book where it's like, Wise Words are always Connected to Intentional Listening. So you're just not going to, wisdom isn't going to fall out of your mouth in that meeting if you aren't spending a lot of your energy in that meeting listening. How many of us, in a

meeting have the wheels spinning while someone is talking, and we can't really even, we see their lips moving, but we have no idea what they're saying. Because we're just waiting for the next gap, because we've got the really good idea. At that moment we're not functioning together as one.

Greg:

And so those are some of the things that I think, in any setting, we begin to try to talk about. Now, I do think, and we probably don't have time to go into this, I do think that there are a couple of really important things that happen inside culture, and inside Christian culture, that we have tolerated, that are very destructive. And one of them, quite honestly, is gossip. We talk about gossip as being this, I don't know-

William :

It's not just gossip, it's a prayer concern.

Greg:

Yeah. And that's exactly right. We've learned how to do that. That's exactly right. And we couch it and we minimize it. And yet when you look at what Paul is saying in Romans, he puts gossipers and slanderers in a list, tucked in the middle of a list with some things like wickedness, and murder, and strife, and God haters. That's not a neighborhood you want to live in, and there's gossip right in the middle of it.

William :

Yeah. Wow.

Greg:

So one of the funny stories that I tell about that, that helps us is that the word there for gossip, in Romans, is an onomatopoeia. So it's a word that sounds like what it is, right. We all remember eighth grade English, but the word there is in the Greek, it is [foreign language 00:29:22], right. And it traces back to these snake charmers, these snake whispers. Okay. So I'm in India. This is a true story. I've got the picture, next time I see you, I'll show you the picture. It's on my phone.

Greg:

We're in India, I'm not condoning this practice, it's just of our hosts there in India thought it'd be fun. We round the corner and there are literally, there are three snake charmers, and they're playing the flutes. They're all out of central casting. It's just amazing. And there are cobras and there's everything. And you're going, "Holy cow." Well, I walk behind them so that I can get in the camera shot. Because I want to be funny and just whatever. And the old guy, and I swear, he's got long flowing, white hair and beard, like you can't believe. And he just looks up at me and he motions with his finger and taps the ground for me to sit down.

Greg:

So now I'm on the hook. Everybody goes, "Greg, you need to sit down, go ahead." And I'm like, "Okay." So I'm sitting down. He starts putting snakes around my neck and every other place, just around my hands and my wrists. I'm not liking this at all. Still no cobras. And then he scoots a box over about 12, 18 inches from my leg, takes the lid off of the box and a cobra comes out.

William :

Oh, my.

Greg:

Now I'm looking at this cobra, literally eye to eye. And what was interesting to me, because you remember the sound. I remember everybody gasping. I remember my body being frozen, but what I remember is the color of his eyes, because they were this pale milky blue. I found out later that's because he was getting ready to shed his skin. So that's what happens, okay. I wouldn't know that. Here's the point that I try to tell people all the time, if you're close enough to a cobra to see the color of his eyes, you're too close.

Greg:

We need to get to a place culturally, where we will not tolerate gossip. When somebody starts to bring that loaded prayer request to me, I go, "Whoa, no, wait, wait, wait, wait. Have you talked to Wade about this because I'm just not going to be a party to that, man. It's just not worth it. Life's too short. You guys got to go. In fact, if you feel weird about it, I'll go with you, but don't say anything else about that until you've talked to him." We've got to get to a place where we won't tolerate that stuff.

Greg:

Now that loops back, and I know we're running out of time. That loops back to that creative collaboration, because anytime we can begin to create a culture that is safe, well now I'm going to throw all sorts of ideas at you, because I don't feel quite as exposed and vulnerable. Now I'm willing to go, "Okay, well, hey, this sounds crazy, but what do you guys think of this?" Because the entire culture starts to feel safer to me. And I do think that those two things are connected.

William :

Well, I think they're going to be more and more connected, particularly as we may be facing new office realities, where there's a lot more virtual collaboration.

Greg:

That is a great point.

William :

Virtual collaborations harder, and if you don't have those building blocks put in place, man. So, I know there are a lot of people listening today who are thinking, "Our office may never be the same, whether you're church, staff or business," I can't think of anything better to work on right now than your collaborative skills as you face a new reality. And if it's not your office changing, it's how about the rate of change? If your team isn't able to collaborate, and we keep speeding up change, oh man, it's going to be tough. So I would just encourage everybody to check out, The Genius of One. And you can find Greg Holder at gregholder.com, but you can also, it's more fun to go to Amazon, because there you'll see his new book that's coming out in September, which [crosstalk 00:33:16] it's going to be a little bit prophetic about how we're reentering the world. It's called, Never Settled. Greg, is there any quick word, just to give us a little sneak peek?

Greg:

Yeah, it is, as much as the first one was about John 17, this one's about Revelation 3. You're neither hot nor cold, but you're lukewarm and I'm about to spit you out. And so the point there is, make a difference, be hot, be cold. Don't be lukewarm. Don't settle for the mediocre. Don't settle for that. And so that whole book is about, how do we reengage and reenter the world? The subtitle of the book is so it's never settled. And then it's choices, chain reactions, and the way out of lukewarmness. And I did write it before this crisis, but as you and I were talking, for me, it's been, "Oh, wow, God, you've been preparing my heart for how we're now going to reengage this world." Because we are going to reengage this world, William. God's not finished with this world, and we're called back into it. And so yeah, I'm excited and curious about what that's going to look like.

William :

Well, Greg, I'm so happy to know what you're doing in St. Louis, and now all over the world through this acceleration that's happened with internet campuses, and appreciate you in The Crossing, and really appreciate you taking time out of a super busy schedule to visit with us. This has been so helpful to me, and I think will be helpful to many others as we try and build our collaborative teams from afar for a while.

Greg:

Yeah. Well, thank you so much. It was an honor and a privilege to be with you and your listeners. So, thanks, William.

William :

Thanks, Greg. Take care.

Greg:

All right, you too.

Holly:

At Vanderbloemen, we help churches, schools, nonprofits, and values-based businesses build their best teams by helping them find their key staff. If you're looking to hire your next team member, or build a succession plan, email me at holly@vanderbloemen.com, or give me a call at (713) 300-9665. We look forward to serving you.