

Holly Tate:

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 God moved in their life to build their ministry. On today's episode, our Founder and CEO, William Vanderbloemen, talks with Pastor Willie George, Founding Pastor of Church on the Move in Tulsa, Oklahoma. William talks with Pastor Willie about how God built Church on the Move and what we can learn from his 16-year succession plan. He addresses challenges along the way and the importance of preparing for growth as a leader. Their conversation provides encouragement and guidance for pastors facing the same difficulties of transition.

Holly Tate:

A thorough transition and succession planning is really important to our team here at Vanderbloemen. We encourage you check out William's updated and expanded edition of Next: Pastoral Succession that Works, which was released April 21st. It has brand new case studies and insights on how you can prayerfully and intentionally navigate your succession plan. You can order your copy on Amazon or at nextpastor.com. And talk to our team at info@vanderbloemen.com if we can help you navigate your succession plan as you set up your ministry for long-term health. To get your takeaways from today's show use the hashtag Vandercast and check out today's show notes to join our Facebook group where we post behind the scenes content.

Holly Tate:

Without further ado, here's William's conversation with Pastor Willie George.

William V.:

Well, hey everybody. We're so glad to have you here today and to have Pastor Willie George here. He is a legend. If you don't travel in his circles, this is a big, big church we serve and, my goodness, the numbers of denominations and tribes. It seems like I'm always meeting somebody new who is a legend in their tribe, but this really is a living legend. Pastor Willie, thank you so much for joining us today.

Pastor Willie George:

It's my pleasure. I love talking to pastors and leaders.

William V.:

Well, you've done an amazing thing. I first got to know Church on the Move probably 10, 15, years ago, but it's been around a long time. This podcast, we're only doing it once a month right now, but it's one of my very favorite things to do every month. You know there's a popular podcast about how people built their businesses, but we've titled this, How God Built This. I would love for you to walk us through a little bit of the origin story of the church, how it got going, and what it was like to see God build this church as it went. I know a lot of people listening are trying to get something built and trying to do something great with their lives. I'm sure that your story would be an encouragement to them.

Pastor Willie George:

Well, in 1970 when I accepted Christ within a month I knew I was going to be a pastor. It wasn't a one moment revelation. It was just something that began to grow inside me and I knew that's what I was going to be.

Pastor Willie George:

So I moved in with my uncle who was a pastor and my childhood hero. He was nine years older than me, so he was in many ways like a big brother. He had a great church. He put me through Bible School. I went back to help him. There wasn't really an opportunity for me to be a senior pastor, and I really wasn't wanting to go do that right away. The more I learned the more I realized I wasn't prepared.

Pastor Willie George:

So children's ministry opened up in the church. I got really involved in reaching kids. We had a fantastic bus ministry. I had six bus routes, one of which was 70 miles away from the church one way. I had a couple of routes that were 50 miles away. Another one 42 miles away. Another one 16 miles away, and then one in the middle of the town of 1100 where the church was.

Pastor Willie George:

I had great success reaching kids. That's how I became known and that ultimately led to a nation-wide children's ministry. We had a kid's TV show called Gospel Bill. I published curriculum.

William V.:

Sorry to interrupt you. You had a kid's TV show. What was the year then?

Pastor Willie George:

We went national in 1984 and it ran in strength to the early '90s.

William V.:

That's crazy. Mr. Rogers only started in the '70s. You didn't have any colleagues doing that, did you? I mean that had to be new, right?

Pastor Willie George:

No. I had one colleague, a guy named Von [inaudible 00:04:42] who was known as Captain Hook. Von was a mentor to me in that department. I learned from him, but we had a lot wider reach. We were on the PTL satellite network. We were on CBN before it became the Family Channel. We were on the TBN network. We were on the LeSEA network, the Acts Network which was a Baptist satellite network, and about 120 independent Christian stations. So we had really wide coverage. I couldn't go anywhere in American without some kid recognizing me. We packed out churches and broke records everywhere we went. It was amazing.

Pastor Willie George:

It was in the middle of this, in 1987, as we began the year, the word for the year is, "Something's Missing." I knew something was missing. I couldn't figure it out. Every month God gave me a new word, either from someone that cared about me and prayed for me. A pastor friend said, "Your staff doesn't see the anointing on you." I said, "Well, they can't. I don't do anything at home. Everything I do is on the road."

Pastor Willie George:

So the next month, in March, another pastor said, "I was praying for you today and I saw you with this big pie, but there was a big piece of your pie missing." I said, "What is it?" He said, "I don't know." I said, "Oh, I wish you knew what it was. I know something's missing. I can't put my finger on it."

Pastor Willie George:

April of that year, the Lord spoke to me and said, "Cut your travel back." Well, I was doing 36 weekends a year traveling in churches, and doing conferences, and seminars. The Lord said, "Cut it back to 24." I thought, "Wow, that's going to be a really big cut in our budget."

Pastor Willie George:

Finally in May, I said, "Lord, I have a mental block. I'm not letting you tell me what I'm supposed to do, and I just right now remove all of my hindrances and roadblocks. Just whatever you put in my heart, I'm going to do that." And, William, I saw myself pastoring. I didn't see myself giving up the kids' ministry, but I saw myself pastoring.

Pastor Willie George:

I saw myself teaching adults and I was overjoyed because that was one thing I did do all the time in teaching children's workers. I did have an extensive teaching ministry. But this really opened up a door for me to change.

Pastor Willie George:

So in July, the 5th of July, 1987 we launched in a hotel ballroom. We had seven Sundays available for rental and nowhere to go after that. But the Holy Spirit said, "Go for it. It'll be fine." We'd inquired about a school and they said, "Somebody beat you to the punch. We're booked up." So the Lord said, "Don't worry. It'll be fine."

Pastor Willie George:

We did about three Sundays in the hotel. We went back to the school and checked, and the other church had decided not to plant. So then we had a place to go for a while.

William V.:

Wow. Wow. And how old were you at the time?

Pastor Willie George:

I was 34 years old. Maybe, yeah 35. 34 when we started and by the time we got the school was 35.

William V.:

And then after your first year you were 45.

Pastor Willie George:

Yeah, that's the truth. That's the truth.

William V.:

I saw the picture floating about the internet, a picture of Tom Hanks as Mr. Rogers. It said, "Pastor in year one." And then it had a picture as the Castaway, stripped down, and "Pastor in year three." It'll take something out of you. What was some of the challenges that surprised you as you entered those first years of planting a church?

Pastor Willie George:

You know when God tells you something and you're certain that he wants you to do it, you're excited about it. We presume that he informs everybody else at the same time, and he forgot to tell a bunch of my friends and mentors, and really mentors that I looked up to. I had been around all of the leaders of our particular movement, and they weren't encouraging at all. There were just some of them who came right out and said we were making a huge mistake because they had seen me only as a guy who ministered to kids. There were people who told jokes about me doing this, so I was hurt.

Pastor Willie George:

Then at the very same moment that we launched there were three national ministries that launched churches within six weeks of when we did our launch. I thought, "Have I really heard from God? This is crazy." And they all blew up and immediately had way bigger numbers than what we ever had hoped to have. It was a bit discouraging.

William V.:

Wow. Are they still around?

Pastor Willie George:

No. None of them exist. None of them made it. Most of them didn't last a couple of years.

William V.:

So-

Pastor Willie George:

Go ahead.

William V.:

No, go ahead.

Pastor Willie George:

I went to Houston to Lakewood Church. Of all my travels, of all the places I'd been, I felt like Lakewood Church in Houston under John Osteen was the soul winningest church that I was around. At the time I didn't know Pastor Tommy Barnett. He would have been right there with him.

Pastor Willie George:

But the Sunday before launched, the last Sunday of June, we were at Lakewood Church and Brother Osteen counted out the people who came forward at the invitation. There were over 100 people that came to Christ that day. I told the Lord, I said, "That's what I want. I want that to be our model. That's the church I want us to have."

Pastor Willie George:

So we came back and we were so excited. I gave invitations and nobody ever responded. The altar call was just deader than a hammer. We didn't have any sinners in our church. I was so discouraged, but I wouldn't quit. Finally I said, "Do you know what? We're going to give faith invitation." I said, "Nobody came today, but let's go ahead and praise God for all those times in the future when there are going to be dozens and dozens of people come to Christ during these invitations."

Pastor Willie George:

So we did that for weeks on end, and then it began to break. There were one, then two, then three. The next thing you know it blew up. We had a Sunday, oh gosh about 2011, 2012, I think when we had 1000 people one weekend accept the Lord. So we eventually got there but it didn't start out that way.

William V.:

Was it always called Church on the Move?

Pastor Willie George:

Always, from the very beginning. I got the name from a guy who had a church called that in Minneapolis. I like it. You know, most of the great ideas we had over the years were not original. In traveling and going to all these other churches I got a chance to see the best things that churches did. One person might have one thing they did better than anybody else. I brought all that home and put it into our church and everybody thought I was a genius. I wasn't a genius at all. I'm just a thief. We borrowed a lot of great ideas.

William V.:

Well, intellectual property lawyers won't like this line, but Solomon did say, "There's nothing new under the sun."

Pastor Willie George:

That's right.

William V.:

There are no new ideas. That's great.

Pastor Willie George:

No new ideas.

William V.:

So you start. You've got your one, your two. I think a lot of people think that growth happens in a straight hockey stick line. I've pastored churches, and the I started this company. Even with the most rapid growth we've had, it's never been consistent or in a straight line. Was it consistent for you guys? How did that look?

Pastor Willie George:

No. It was a series of plateaus. We would hit a certain number and we would park there for a good long while. God would let us catch our breath, get our bearing, reorganize, recruit for the weak spots. I walked by a two-year-old class. Two and three-year-old class. There were 25 kids and there was one worker. I said, "Becky, is this an anomaly, or are you having this all the time?" She says, "No, I have this all the time." I said, "You're kidding me. Does our children's minister know you have this?" She said, "Yes." I said, "What does he say?" She said, "He says we can't get workers." So I thought, "Man, we're stuck. We're not going to grow." Anybody who cares about their two and three-year-old kids is not going to put them in these classes where there's just one adult.

Pastor Willie George:

So I preached a sermon, and gave an invitation, and we had 35, 40 workers come forward to volunteer for children's ministry. I gave our children's guy instructions to train them. We had an all-day seminar on Saturday. Within six weeks, they were all gone. They'd all quit. This guy was terrible. He did not know how to train and release people so he blamed everybody else for his failure. So we couldn't keep workers. So I brought a new guy in who had a reputation for being really good. In no time we have hundreds of workers, and we grew again.

Pastor Willie George:

I have a belief. That is, you make room for increase before you get the increase. You do when you're small what you would have to do if you were big, and then you'll get big.

William V.:

I think I've made the mistake, I still make it, but particularly a younger leader, momentum is the leader's friend. And then when the momentum of growth stops and you hit a plateau, the first thing I do is run around like a chicken with my head cut off trying to figure out how to grow again. I think as I get older I'm realizing, "Wait a minute. God put us on a flat place for a little bit to get ready for the next climb."

Pastor Willie George:

Absolutely.

William V.:

I'm learning, "What am I supposed to be doing in this flat place to prepare?" I don't know if that's good theology or leadership but it's just what I'm learning. It sounds like some of what you went through.

Pastor Willie George:

No. It's what everybody goes through really. You prepare for the future. The Lord actually put it in my heart one time. He said, "I'm holding people away from your church right now because if you got them you're not ready for them. It would be a blessing to you if they don't come for a while."

Pastor Willie George:

You know the Bible says, "A brother offended is harder to be won than a city." So you have people come to you and you offend them by your lack of preparedness, your lack of service, your lack of parking, your lack of not being able to handle the children's ministry, the babies, the lack of personnel. People walk away with a bad taste, and even though you may eventually prepare yourself they probably won't be back for a while. They will have to hear that you've gotten that fixed before they'll ever return.

William V.:

The plateaus are for preparation. How's that?

Pastor Willie George:

I agree. I think yes. I mean that's why we take steps. We don't use ramps. Ramps are slick. Steps are nice little resting places.

William V.:

Oh, that's good.

Pastor Willie George:

The steps of a righteous man are ordered of the Lord. It's the devil who came to Jesus and said, "Why don't you leap off this temple?" We hear about the leap of faith, but there is no term called the leap of faith anywhere in the Bible. There are steps of faith. "A man heart devises his way, but the Lord directs his steps." Proverbs 16:9. So steps really are little mini plateaus. Thank God we have them.

William V.:

My goodness, that is gold right there. Somebody is in a plateau. They need to learn it's time to prepare. It's steps and not ramps. I love that. It feels like the enemy is the one who has the slippery slope rather than ordered steps. That's good.

Pastor Willie George:

That's right.

William V.:

So as you guys grew what would have been a couple of the plateaus. I don't know if it's numerically or your staff head count, that you're like you really learned some good lessons through that we might learn from today?

Pastor Willie George:

You know, we hit 600 at our first birthday. I did a lot of good things. I had an entry path into the church. I had membership. We really worked that plan. We did it well. And for the size church we were it was a good system. I actually taught a membership class before the services started. So it was a chance for people to get to know me and for us to meet together in a small group. We'd have 40, 50 people at a time in that class. Every month we'd repeat it.

Pastor Willie George:

Now eventually we outgrew my ability to do that because we went to two services and I couldn't do that membership class again. So we weren't as good with assimilation after a while. And another thing. We didn't do groups. We were Wednesday night people and we didn't do groups at all. We began to grow beyond our ability to connect, and so we lost something in the order of discipleship along the way. I was under the impression that if you could just teach good and explain things well, that you could create accountability with your people.

Pastor Willie George:

But after a number of years, we had some moral failures from some of our people who had been with us for years. They were moral failures that baby Christians didn't even get into. I thought, "Wait a minute, how do these people sit here Sunday in, Sunday out. They're very faithful to church. I mean these are all-time people. They're here all the time. And to have these failures." I realized we weren't really discipling people as well as we should have been, and good preaching from the pulpit alone won't do that.

William V.:

I was interviewing Luis Palau for this show. I asked him what he would credit his formula to. I figured he was going to say he studied under Billy Graham because everybody knows Billy took a great interest in Luis over the years. He said, "Actually what taught me the most was a book that was about Joe Kennedy's strategy for getting Jack Kennedy elected." It had very little to do with what Jack said from the stage. It had a whole lot to do with organizations and systems and getting planned before you ever get there.

William V.:

I know as a pastor I used to think, "Well, if I just preach better, then everybody will show up and nobody will sin, and it'll all be great." But it's just not that simple, is it?

Pastor Willie George:

No. It doesn't work that way. I am still a firm believer in good preaching, good communication from the pulpit. But without the structure, it's the Monday through Friday stuff that makes the difference.

William V.:

That's good. So you got how far down the road? I want to turn a corner here, because what's really, really cool about having you on the show is we're in the middle of finishing and releasing our second book on succession. It used to just be a dirty word. People didn't want to talk about it. What's the line in the Catholic church? "The only sick pope is a dead pope." Like nobody wants to talk about when a pastor is going to retire.

William V.:

But you have been out in the front, tip of the spear, like you have been with so many things, and led a process of your own succession. So when did that start for you internally? When did it start externally? Walk us through. When did God begin to speak to you about this?

Pastor Willie George:

You know about 15, 16 years ago for the first time ever I thought, "Okay, there will be a day when I'll pass this off." At the time I couldn't imagine when that would be. I certainly didn't think it would happen when I was 65 years old. I didn't think that would happen.

Pastor Willie George:

It's difficult for people to see the next phase of life if it's a different phase. You know I was teaching at ORU here a while back and I told all those guys with little two-door sports cars, I said, "There's a minivan in your future. In just a couple of three years you're going to have McDonald's french fries ground into the carpet of your backseat. There are going to be all these little Happy Meal wrappers laying all around

your car." "No, no, no, no." "Trust me. Five years, it's coming. You can't imagine it, but you'll trade your sports car in for a minivan." Of course, they're laughing at it, but it's the truth.

Pastor Willie George:

It's hard to see the very next phase of life. I knew there had to be a transition someday so I thought, "Who would it be?" I thought, "You know, my son Whit works with me more closely than anybody." I've got great team members, but my son Whit, in terms of being in the next generation is really the most valuable help.

Pastor Willie George:

And what I saw about Whit, Whit helped interpret me to a younger generation. He would have advice for me in wording things a particular way. I was going to do a sermon on loyalty and he said, "Dad, can we talk about this sermon series you're going to do on loyalty." He said, "Our generation doesn't use that term much." Because there had been some people who'd demanded loyalty who had some moral failures and so forth, it was a little bit of a bad word. He said, "Here's what we go by. Okay. We say this all the time. 'Don't throw me under the bus.' Can we call this series Don't Throw Me Under the Bus?" I thought, "That's an excellent idea."

Pastor Willie George:

So that is pretty typical of what we did in those day. Whit was really great. He was really jealous for the church. I could tell he loved it and he had a passion for wanting to see longevity with the church. I had seen him as a creative guy, which was what everybody knew Whit was. But I saw him with the pastor's heart. His creativity was driven by a pastor's heart.

Pastor Willie George:

But the problem was this, Whit didn't preach and our people never really saw Whit on the stage. Whit was the guy who made everything go but he was invisible. I thought, "I've got to change this. If the church is ever going to go with him, he's going to have to get out front."

Pastor Willie George:

In the beginning, he didn't like speaking. But there was a pastor in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex named Ed Young that Whit fell in love with. Whit said, "I can't be like my dad. I can't preach like my dad. My dad has a knowledge of the Bible, and the way he tells stories, my dad's just different. I don't think I could ever be that kind of communicator. But I like Ed." This was probably 20 years ago, or maybe 15.

Pastor Willie George:

So anyway, Ed was really used of God to be a model for Whit, and Whit began to desire to communicate. Andy Stanley was another one way back there. Mark Driscoll. These were guys that really resonated with him. As a dad, you know it was a little troubling to me, because you always want to be your son's hero. I got to tell you, I got so sick of hearing about Tim Keller, Andy Stanley, and Mark Driscoll and Ed Young. What about dad?

Pastor Willie George:

But then I thought, "That's understandable." I didn't want to be like the guys that came before me. I learned some things from them but I had to cut my own swath. I thought this is just part of what it

means to transition. If you think that every generation is going to be exactly the same and receive in the same way, with the same style, with the same mode of communication, you're wrong.

Pastor Willie George:

So I started giving Whit these Sundays. I would give him Memorial Day weekend, and Labor Day weekend, and the Sunday after Christmas, between Christmas and New Years, and the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Those were his days. What's ironic is those are the days I get now.

William V.:

I was a young associate pastor in the Presbyterian church and always preached on the Sunday after Christmas and whatever Sunday fell next to July 4th, and that sort of thing. We always called the Sunday after Christmas Worldwide Associate Pastor Sunday.

Pastor Willie George:

Okay. That's good. Well, it's Worldwide Founder Pastor at our church. No, they've been very good to me, but it's different.

Pastor Willie George:

And in those days, Whit couldn't do a series. He'd do one Sunday, and it was taxing for him. He didn't want me there so I had to watch from the speaker's room, or watch online, because he didn't want me sitting on the front row. It made him nervous. So I had to let him begin to grow into it, and he did. He did a great job and the next thing you know he's doing two Sundays in a row, and three. Then I'm hearing from the people, "Whit is really doing well. Man, he's getting good." So I knew we were headed somewhere.

William V.:

Was that hard?

Pastor Willie George:

It was hard, yeah, in some ways because I wanted him to do well, and I was feeling it for him. My wife is the one who really went through it because she said, "It's like living with you getting started all over again." She said, "I used to just sit on pins and needles when you were just starting to preach. I forgot what that was like because you eventually got okay. Whit's not there yet. I have the same feelings all over again." But he got better and better and better although it was a different style communication than me.

Pastor Willie George:

But the real test was I put Whit over the staff. There some things about our church that I wasn't seeing. I want to insert something here really quick that'll help, I think, people understand. It takes three generations to really build a church. Every generation has a gift. The first generation to come along, their strength is doctrine. They will lay down a doctrine and explain God, and lay down, "This is what we believe." That's what that generation is known for. The guys who came one generation before me, they were doctrine guys.

Pastor Willie George:

I came along. My generation, we're visionaries. We took their doctrine and we built more 10,000 member churches than any generation in history. So we were great visionaries. We said, "Hey, this is a great message. We're going to do something with it." And we built all of these teams. That's not to say they weren't visionaries. There were a few who were, but they were primarily doctrine guys. I mean, they're giving us the four spiritual laws and they're talking to us about, "God's a good God." Oral Robert's Expect a Miracle. I mean, they're all into these major doctrinal statements, and that's what their gift was.

Pastor Willie George:

Ours was all about vision. Building teams. Let's reach the world. I thought, "Well, that's it. That's it. We've got everything you need." And then Whit comes along with something totally different, and I'd never seen it before. He comes along with this emphasis on culture. If I could compare doctrine to the foundation of a house, then vision is the walls, the roof, the ceiling, the grandeur of the home, just the structure.

Pastor Willie George:

But the home has to be furnished. It has to be warmed up. That's where you hang pictures and you put lighting in. You've got furniture and rugs, and all of those décor items that create a warmth and a culture. That's what this next generation is building in the church. They've got really good culture. We weren't a great place to work, and Whit made our church a great place work. He created all-staff meetings and recognized people who made contributions. It blew me away. I thought, "This is something I didn't see." And the guys who came before me, they didn't see what I did. Every generation has this gift. It's Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and we all have an emphasis.

Pastor Willie George:

So I saw, okay, in order for this church to go where it needs to go, he's going to have to take it there because I don't get the culture thing like he does.

William V.:

What surprised you in the hand-off. I'm thinking particularly, we have a lot of small business owners that listen and something like 85% of small businesses are family businesses. Right? So they've probably got a son or a daughter that's going to follow them. Then there are a whole lot of churches, particularly in your tribe it's a very, very common thing, for things to be passed on to the first-born or one of the children. John Osteen, you mentioned before, passed it right down to Joel, and that seems to have worked out okay. Pastor Tommy Barnett, same sort of deal.

William V.:

So it happens a lot and I think rather than try and talk people out of it, it's not right for everybody. It doesn't work in the Presbyterian Church for whatever reason. But when that is the dynamic, I would love to dig into the things that surprised you, the lessons you've learned as you're trying to prepare the person that's already in-house to take over. What surprised you along the way.

Pastor Willie George:

Well, we've got three phases in transition in my opinion, at least in our style of transition. The first is the preparation phase. That can be a lengthy process. In our case, it was over 10 years. I was preparing Whit for leadership, bringing him in, sitting him down talking to him, explaining how there were times I had to

make hard decisions. I had to make unpopular decisions. Sometimes it's lonely being the leader. Then I talked a lot about balancing your personal life and your spiritual life. You can't take this so seriously that you neglect your family.

Pastor Willie George:

So the preparation phase was the longest phase by far, and that's toughest on the successor. The successor is, "Why doesn't he let me have it? I'm ready to go. I can handle this. I can do this." I actually had a couple of meetings with Whit where I said, "Look, quit trying to push me out the door. I can feel you pushing. It's coming soon enough, but it's not time yet." So he said, "Okay, dad, I'll quit pushing." I asked him, "What changes have you recommended and suggested that I haven't done." He said, "Nothing." I said, "Then give me a break. Don't push like you're pushing." I could tell he was becoming a little impatient. What really hurts that is social media and the ability to look across the street at somebody that's actually younger than you are that went out and planted their own church, and now they're a senior leader. So you're not getting any younger and you're wondering, "Hey, is this ever going to happen to me?"

Pastor Willie George:

I asked myself this question. "Is it fair of me to make Whit keep waiting?" I thought, "I've got to wait for the release." When we celebrated our 30th anniversary we were doing all kinds of planning for it. That was back in 2017. I happened to turn 65 that year. I thought, "This is it. This is the year." And I could see Whit's ready. He's patient. He's not pushing.

Pastor Willie George:

So we entered in the shortest phase, and that's the celebration phase. Now that's toughest on the congregation. That's when people, you have to comfort them and tell them, "I'm not leaving. I'm still here. I will still be around. I'm still going to be on the board. I will communicate regularly. You'll hear me." So you're having to convince them that this is not a death and a departure. In some cases, that does happen and it is a little tougher. But the middle phase, which I call the celebration phase, that's toughest on the congregation.

Pastor Willie George:

The aftermath, that's toughest on the founder. Then one day you wake up and you realize I don't have the same stroke at the church that I had two years ago. I don't have the same clout. I can't demand the staff do this or do that, and if I do push my way around it's going to create a monster at the church. I've got to learn to step back.

Pastor Willie George:

One thing in particular for me, Whit and I were talking about this two nights ago with a group of pastors. He said, "People said you're going to feel a weight." He said, "I'll be honest with you. I didn't feel a weight when I took over as senior pastor." He said, "I didn't feel it the first year. This last year I felt it." I said, "Okay, let me give you the other side of that. This last year is when I let it all go. The first year I kept praying for the church. I kept praying all the time." I said, "You know when you pray for something, you take on responsibility. You're very watchful. You feel burdens. I had all of that stuff even after I turned over the church to you. I'm praying for the church just like I always did."

Pastor Willie George:

That was a problem, because as I would pray I would fall back into my old habits of, "It's time for an action step." I'd find myself wanting to go do something, and it's not my action to take. So I began to see, I've got to quit praying for the church and trying to carry the burden. I've got to let that go. I made that decision this last year. It's interesting Whit said, "I felt the weight of the church hit me like never before." It was because I quit praying the way I'd been praying. I said, "God, he's got to have it. He's got to carry this load. I'm going to pray for him. That's going to be my prayer mission. I'm going to pray for him."

Pastor Willie George:

So that's the aftermath, and it's toughest on the founder. Sometimes it's tough on the founder's wife. It can be tough on others.

William V.:

Talk about that.

Pastor Willie George:

Well, you've been the first lady of the church and you've had a particular style. My wife was a stay-at-home mom, not highly visible, never on the stage with me. She would do meetings with the ladies and the ladies loved her. But she struggled to prepare, and you'd never know it. When she got on the stage, she was magnificent. So I might tell the staff how long she worked on that message, and how rough it was on her. They couldn't believe it because she was such at ease in her presentation and it was so good. And I knew the truth. It was not an easy thing for her to minister. She was not an organizer, didn't want to be at the church. I was so gung-ho about church that, honestly, if she hadn't been the champion for our own home I don't know how we would have made it. So she was our home champion.

Pastor Willie George:

So Whit's wife is a total opposite. She's right in the middle of things. She likes to be at the core meeting every week to hear what's going on. She's very much a part of choosing all of the outreaches that we do. The unwed mothers' homes, the orphanages, the schools we sponsor, all of that stuff she's in the middle of all that. She's got a real burden for our city, and that's totally foreign to my wife.

Pastor Willie George:

So when you've been the first lady of the church and now the new first lady has repainted all the bedrooms and the living room, and changed all the furniture, it can be a little disconcerting. Takes a little while to get used to. So that's why it's so very important that my wife and I have something else that we do. We can't just sit around and hover over the church.

William V.:

That's so good. That's so good because I don't know, I've said this a thousand times, but having lived it and now having sat with a lot of guys who've gone through it. When you leave the church, you just don't know how little the phone rings. I mean, there's no job I know, outside of maybe being a head of state, that absorbs as much of a man's identity as being a pastor of a large church. Or maybe just any church, forget large. Then when that's over identity gets hard to define, and I see people struggle when they don't have something to go to.

William V.:

So can you walk us through how you figure out, because you're in a pretty cool next step. I think it would be an encouragement to people that are facing that, "Oh, somebody needs to take over," to know that there's life on the other side. Tell us how you got where you are and what you're doing now.

Pastor Willie George:

Well, I had to change the way I saw my relationship with younger pastors. Larry Stockstill, who has a great connection to younger pastors, said this to me. He said, "Willie, this new generation is looking for affirmation. If you and I will just learn to affirm these young men we will never lack for a place to preach. We will have all the relationships we want. We have doors open everywhere because they're all looking for affirmation."

Pastor Willie George:

Really, when you're leading your own church and you're the key leader, you are so busy doing what you're doing, the way you relate to other ministries is not so much about affirmation. I'll maybe preach one of my sermons that went over really good at my church. I can help you a little bit with some stuff here. But really basically what I do now when I go to a young pastor's church I'm there to serve him, help him, boost him, compliment him. If he allows me to I'm there not so much to correct, but to make suggestions that might help him. But the main thing I'm there for is to lift him up, and just say, "Man, you're doing a great job. I'm so proud of you guys." That was not something I did well. I had to learn to do that. So that was the attitude I had to take on.

Pastor Willie George:

Now I've got three things I'm doing for those guys right now. One, I operate a hunting and fishing retreat center where I take eight pastors at a time for three days. I do that six months of the year. It's fabulous. I never know where we're going I thought that I could set a theme for each season, but it hasn't worked that way. Some guys are in the biggest family problem of their life. They've got a kid who's in trouble, or goofing off, or whatever. Most of it is just silliness, it's not really evil. So they see my sons and they said, "Man, you did such a good job. You've got such great kids." I tell them, "You wouldn't have thought they were that great when they were 20, when they were 18."

Pastor Willie George:

My son Gabriel would go into his high school English class, first class of the morning. Make a grand appearance, make sure the teacher knew he was there. This lady was out to lunch, then he would slip out the door and go to Dunkin Donuts across the street, buy three dozen doughnuts, come back to the school, never get caught. Slip in with three dozen doughnuts and every kid in the class had doughnuts courtesy of my son.

William V.:

Please tell me he didn't [crosstalk 00:41:30].

Pastor Willie George:

Yeah, he is. He's a campus pastor. It's just funny. It really is funny how that worked out. But at the time, when he was 18 years old, Whit was 20, you would never have guessed they're going to be the dads they are, the leaders they are. But they're kids. I think sometimes pastors have this idea that if my son's going to be a minister, and if he's going to be a pastor, I need to be able to see the traces of that at 16. I

didn't see anything like that in my boys when they were 16. They're weren't bad kids. They were just goofballs.

William V.:

Yep. Yep. That makes sense. So now in this new role, you've got something to do. Does your wife play a part in that, or has she found a new niche to place her energies?

Pastor Willie George:

Yes. She leads small group, and her small group ladies love her. I mean, I'm almost like space aliens kidnapped my wife and took over her body. That was not her, but she really has done a good job with that. Another thing, I am about to launch a podcast for pastors, and my wife is my number one researcher. She gets up at 4:30 in the morning and is in her Bible and in her study books. I get up a little bit after that. I'm usually up by 5:30, and by the time I get up she's already uncovered all kinds of nuggets and she's doing great stuff. She keeps me sharp. I don't have access to all the people at the church anymore for the research, but now I've got the best one I've ever had. It's my wife.

Pastor Willie George:

Then she has a baked beans recipe that pastors will drive 500 miles to get. So at our ranch when we serve meals, we have a nice little dinner we do. One of those dinners has got these amazing baked beans in it. She insists on making every batch. It's a lot of work, but she does it and that's her way of participating. And then she has been just such an encouragement to me.

Pastor Willie George:

Finally, I'm traveling and I'm preaching in about 20 churches a year. That's about all I can handle. I'm a homebody anyway, William. I've never been a great traveler. I did it because I had to, but 20 is about all I can handle.

William V.:

That is so good. Well, I think there's so many lessons to learn here. I wonder. If you thought back to 16 years ago when you were first looking at succession, saying, "I think I can see the day." What do you know now that you wish you could tell that person 15 years ago?

Pastor Willie George:

Well, I would say, "Take advantage of the teachable moments. Explain yourself maybe a little bit more." You know, any strong leader is going to be misunderstood. Again, a couple of nights ago we were sitting around talking with a group of pastors around a campfire at our ranch. My son, I bring him out for those. I want him to be there. I do a night or two myself and then I have him come one night, because I want them to see both sides of this.

Pastor Willie George:

The one thing that's happening a lot now is he said, "I am getting my dad more than I ever did before," which tells me that there were probably a lot of things that he didn't understand, things that I did. Now because he's in that position he get it, and he understands it, and he believes it. It's that way with everybody. Very few people can look at a leader and say, "Yeah, I understand everything you're doing, and I understand why you're doing it." The successor doesn't get that. But it would be good, I think, if I'd

gone back and explained a little bit along the way and not just done it. I think that might have been helpful.

Pastor Willie George:

The other thing is to encourage and to communicate. Let me say this. Not all pastors go through this. Mike Hayes and I, he had a marvelous transition with his son in Dallas, we were talking about this. I said, "Mike, the devil lies to me about my son. And he lies to my son about me. But when we sit down and talk, we find out that none of our thoughts were true. That the things that we misunderstood about each other were phantom ideas. They did not exist. The differences were not there. As I sit and talk with him I find out I had no basis for whatever fear I may have had, and he with me. We're getting better and better all the time."

Pastor Willie George:

Mike said, "I've been through the same thing. When I sit down and talk with my son, there's nothing to any of the thoughts that I had. None of it. We are on the same page. But when we're apart the enemy works on us." Now he, Larry Stockstill, and I did a little transition thing in June at the Stockstill's church. Brother Larry did not have this experience. He doesn't have any of these issues. He and his son, there's absolutely no shadow of a doubt or there's not mistrust or whatever. But Mike and I both looked at Larry and we said, "You are not our generation. We're the founders. Your dad passed the church to you. You have a different take on the church than we did because this is something we carved out of nothing with our own hands. You were brought in as a transition leader yourself."

William V.:

That's really good. You know when Jesus said, "Be ye perfect as I am perfect," I think he probably could have said, "Be ye perfect just like Larry's perfect," because he's pretty dang close to Jesus. That might have been why [crosstalk 00:47:57].

Pastor Willie George:

Larry is a great man. He really is.

William V.:

But I love that. The founders, I think, carry a different weight for what they founded than anybody after them.

Pastor Willie George:

That's the truth. You know, you just don't flip a switch and turn that off.

William V.:

That's right.

Pastor Willie George:

I mean when you're in prayer and you're watchful in prayer, and what you're doing in prayer is you're picking up on attacks of the enemy before they happen. So you're a little bit on your guard, and that's just a hard thing to walk away from because that was a much a part of my watchfulness as what I did in the pulpit. That is, the spiritual care of the church and being sensitive to whatever attacks might rise. It

may be a staff attack, or a lack of finances, or outward criticism from the community, or whatever. You're always watchful about those kinds of things. You just don't flip that switch and walk out the door and say, "Okay. I let it go."

Pastor Willie George:

It's like I had an uncle who was in the Marine Corps in World War II. He came home and when planes flew low overhead his house he would run outside and hit the dirt. He was used to being strafed by Japanese Zeros. He had, no doubt, some PTSD. I hope I said that right, but anyway, that is an issue that we pastors have. It takes a while to let do.

William V.:

It sure does. But, man, you've done a good job of it, and I think it's something that ought to be studied and commended. I can't thank you enough for taking the time to join us today and share so honestly. I just know it's going to be a blessing to people. Thank you so much for all you're doing and for the time today.

Pastor Willie George:

William, I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

William V.:

Pastor Willie, we'll be praying for you, and if you've got an open chair for hunting, I'll come out there and do my best. We've loved and followed your ministry.

William V.:

If you subscribe to our vandernews.com, or if you want just the show notes, vandernews.com, then we'll send you everything about this show and how you can learn more about Pastor Willie and some resources. Thank you for everybody tuned in today. It's amazing to me to see how God is building his church in so many different ways, and to see how God built Church on the Move and has now built it for the next generation. Man, that's a good thing. Thank you so much, Willie, for all you've done.

Pastor Willie George:

My pleasure. Thank you.

Holly Tate:

At Vanderbloemen, we help churches, schools, non-profits and value-safe 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.