

Leadership Collective Podcast

Hello and welcome to the Leadership Collective Podcast, a conversation focusing on the challenges that leaders face in ministry.

Each month we sit down with ministry leaders to discuss the nuts and bolts of how they've navigated specific challenges in ministry and the lessons they've learned along the way.

I'm Ted Leavenworth, pastor of Reliance Church in Temecula, California.

I'm Rob Salvato, lead pastor at Calvary Vista, in Vista California.

(Ted) So our conversation today is centering around navigating through church splits and dealing with disruptions in a church team or church staff. Our guest is Pastor Tony Clark from Calvary Chapel Newport News. Tony, welcome to the conversation.

(Tony) Glad to be here, honored to be here. I really am.

(Ted) Praise the Lord.

(Rob) It's so great to have you in the studio. You know, Tony, I think every pastor at some point is going to experience a church split of sorts. Several years ago you went through a difficult season at your church. I'm not sure if you would actually call it a church split but there was definitely some fallout and I know that can be a really, really hard thing to talk about because it involves families and it involves close friends and sometimes, even teammates. Can you just share your story with us and what you went through?

(Tony) You know, I was talking to Jenise about this and I told her how I can now talk about this in a proper way, in

a good way. I went through various evolutions of this and when it first happened I blamed everyone except where the blame should have gone. Then slowly, as the years went on, I began to get proper perspective of what took place and I put the blame where the blame should have been, and that is on myself. It took place back in 2010, it's been eleven years now. Just prior to that in 2008 and 2009, the church was just growing by leaps and bounds. It was just crazy! We were at three services at the time and about to go to a fourth, so I needed help. Normally what I would do is I would raise up people from within the ministry and I would bring them on and pay them to do what they were doing as a volunteer. So I believe in raising up folks from within.

(Ted) Yeah.

(Tony) But what happened was that I didn't have anybody. Because we are a military area, and we talked about that on previous podcast, because we are a military area and many of them want to do "out of uniform" what they did "in uniform." So they are retired from the military and then Uncle Sam will pay for them to do the same job, but "out of uniform" that they did "in uniform" and we call that double dipping because they can get that second career and get another retirement check right along with their military one. So they don't want to come on staff - that's the point! They don't want to serve, they still want to do their thing. So I said, "I got to get some help." So I did. I brought in guys. I just put it on Church Staffing, and all these other places, and I just brought in whoever was willing, "Whosoever will, let him come!"

(Group laughter)

(Tony) The problem with that is that they came for a job. I was not their pastor. I was just somebody they worked for but I was just glad to have somebody in place. But over a period of time, see, this is what began to happen...I began to deteriorate privately. There are three gauges that every pastor needs to look out for. He needs to look out for his spiritual gauge; where is he with God? He needs to look out for his physical gauge; what kind of health is he in physically? And his emotional gauge; where is he emotionally? We have to key in on those three gauges and make sure we watch those gauges, "Are they getting low? Are you on empty?" And so, because the church

was growing so fast and so many things were happening, I got behind the eight ball. Sure, I was still in the Word and I would still pray, but I'd just get a sermon and just go through the motions and I began to deteriorate spiritually. Here's the big thing, my private life didn't match my public life. And just like in the Old Testament with the kings, when the kings began to not be right with God - watch this - God raised up an enemy against them. That is what began to take place; God raised up an enemy from within against me. A Jeroboam and all these folks...Ahithophel; He raised up an enemy against me. So those guys began to come against me. It was like a coup that took place. To make a long story short, I ended up having to let go of five pastors and they are leaders and leaders lead, you know?

(Ted) And they've got circles of influence.

(Tony) *You'd better believe it.* So they took anywhere between three and seven hundred people. I don't know if I'd call it a church split because when I think of church split I think of split down the middle. But it had all the ingredients of a church split and they did all they could to try to destroy me.

(Rob) Did they go start another work nearby?

(Tony) They tried. They tried. They tried to do something and it flopped and as I mentioned before, God won't bless mess! So they tried to do something. They tried to destroy my reputation. They wrote six and seven anonymous pages, letters, to all my friends around the country. They sent letters out to the people in the church. And people who I was their pastor for sixteen years or more, they sided with these guys. And that taught me a lesson: friendships trump pastor/sheep relationships. You can have been their pastor for twenty years, but if you hurt their friend and their friend leaves, then they will leave too because see, you only teach them the Bible on Sundays and Wednesdays. But, of course, on top of that, we marry them, we bury their relatives...but that's just what we're supposed to do! They're like, "You hurt my friend and because you hurt my friend, I'm going too." So, I said, "I was their pastor, some of them for sixteen plus years and this guy's been here a year and a half, this guy's been here two years, and you sided with them?!" I was blown away. What happened is that God showed

me some things after I got over being angry at the whole situation. One of the things that God told me was, "Keep your mouth closed. Do not try to defend yourself. You know why this is happening. Don't defend yourself." But what ended up happening is that there were several people who I thought, *Well, I'm just going to tell them a little bit.* And I told a little bit of what these guys were doing and these people still left the church! And the Lord said, "I told you not to say anything." Then, as years went by, I began to understand, just as Shimei ended up cursing David as he was leaving and we all know about Abishai and all those guys who were like, "Let me go over there and chop his head off!" And he said, "What have I to do with you guys? You guys always want to kill somebody!" He said, "No, maybe God told him to curse me." So I said, "You know what? God had these guys to do this." But, this is where they got in trouble, this is what broke down their whole scheme, they tried to destroy the church to get to me. The church is the Bride of Christ, you mess with another man's wife and the husband is going to get you! So this is why God said, "Take your hands off, I am going to deal with the situation." And sure enough, just like the Babylonians who took the Israelites into captivity, God then dealt with the Babylonians! So therefore God spanked me on my rear end for my private life, and then God dealt with them because they tried to destroy the church to get to me and when I heard them say that, I said, "Ya'll are going to be in trouble." And God dealt with each one of them severely.

(Ted) You know, what comes to my mind when you said, "Man, I've been their pastor, some of them for sixteen years," and you kind of feel like Jesus talking to Philip, "Don't you know Me, Philip? All this time I've been with you, don't you know Me?" But it is that real experience where you ask yourself, "How could they believe that, or how could they follow that person and how could they not know me?" So, in navigating that season a big part of it was, as you just shared, you saying, "Ok, God, why have you allowed this? What is the work You want to do in me?" Let's kind of explore how you got your church back on track, how that informed you moving forward and getting things in the right direction?

(Rob) And I would add to this too, how long did it take you personally to heal and how long after all that went down did you come to the place to realize what the real issue was?

(Tony) I knew. That's what made me even more angry because I knew all of this was going down because of me, but I wanted to blame somebody else. I wanted to blame those guys and those people...but deep down inside I knew. To be honest with you, I have never healed, let me tell you why. This is what I tell people. You remember how in Hebrews eleven it talks about how Jacob worshipped leaning on top of a staff? When Jacob wrestled with the Lord and the Lord popped his hip and he had the limp? He leaned on top of a staff. His name was changed to Israel, "Governed by God." Some people say that can be translated that way. So every time he limped on that hip, God was saying, "Don't ever go back to your Jacob-deceiving ways again." It was a reminder to him. The reason why I never got over this was because God said, "I want to remind you to never go back to your 'Jacob ways' again." So the pain is a reminder, it's a reminder to me, "Don't try to go back to your 'Jake-the-snake' ways. Don't do it." So I've learned to move on. I know what it takes so I'm always watching myself spiritually, emotionally, and physically. I'm always watching my life. Let me show you how God began to redeem and restore the years that the locusts had eaten up. Once I confessed my own sin - and you remember how it took David nine months to confess his sin with Bathsheba. He said his bones ached within him. He described what holding on to that did to him - well I realized this and stopped blaming them and pointing to everybody else and started looking at me, then the Lord began to work in me. I increased my prayer life and I started watching myself very closely and here's what happened. From 2011 to 2012 in one year, our church grew by a thousand people. So even though seven hundred left, God restored the years that the locust had eaten up and the church grew by a thousand people. I don't say that to brag or boast about anything because it is only by the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, that I was not consumed. But that's what took place. The thing about it is that I have to deal with the consequences of my actions. Before this our church was very, very, very, multicultural. At that time, 2008, 2009, 2010, our church was about 65% white, about 20% black and then we had Koreans and Hispanics and all kinds of folks. And I'll never forget it. When all this took place, not only did they take all the white people because the whites were married to the Koreans, many of them, so they took the Korean community. I remember when I did a funeral for a child of a white and Korean couple and all the Koreans came back, you should have seen the look that they gave me. This is what I have to deal with. I have to live with this. One or two of them looked at me and said, "You destroyed our church." And I have to live with that. I got to live with them looking at me as destroying the church.

So we had that level of multiculturalism prior to this. We were translating the sermons into Spanish, Kiswahili, - the language in Africa - Korean, French, because you know, in the Republic of Congo and places like that they speak French. So it was an amazing church but what we saw as the consequences of my actions, is what we, in the black community, call, "White flight." Almost all the whites left so the ones who came in were almost all African-American. They were black, and we had blacks from either the Dominican Republic or somewhere else in the world where they look like me, but you talk to them and they may speak, Spanish, French or Kiswahili, whatever. So with the naked eye you'd see that our church is predominantly black, with the naked eye, but they are folks from all around the world. So we are still multicultural, but with the naked eye, the "eye test," people would say, "That's a black church." It's not, but that's what they say and that's what came out of the debacle in 2010.

(Ted) When we think about ministering and our role as pastors and shepherds, it really is as husband and wife, you give your entire life to it.

(Tony) Yeah.

(Ted) So as you navigated through this and all the stuff you had to come to terms with that you were talking about like, "Man, I brought this on my self." How did that translate? How did you work it through as a couple? What were some of the things that your wife had to deal with in that?"

(Tony) That's good! That's good because my wife is tough. She is the oldest child in her family so she has that older sibling toughness. She has always been tough. Her mom raised the girls - her and her sisters - to be independent, strong...they're tough! I was raised by a strong dad so I got a toughness to me as well. Jenny sings on the worship team and our worship leader at the time was double dipping; he had retired from the Air Force and he was working for the government so he could double dip, but he was so faithful. At that time we had services Sunday mornings, Sunday nights, and Wednesdays and I would say in sixteen years he missed only five

Sundays. Five Sundays in sixteen years. He was so faithful. I loved that guy but because somebody gave him a copy of the letter and he read that letter, he wrote us and just said, "I am out of here." That was all he wrote. Jenise cried and that was the first time I've ever really seen her cry. It was very tough because they were very close. I mean from the time we were in my living room and in my garage, when we first started the church, he was there. So they had done ministry all the way, sixteen years of doing ministry and all he wrote was, "I am out of here." His wife is also Korean. When he wrote that, that's when I thought, "You know what, you can do whatever you want to do with me. You can say whatever you want to say to me, but when you cause my wife to be in tears...that was one of the first times I really thought about saying, "I'm out of here! Deuces! Ya'll can have this mess. I'm going to take my little baby wife and we can go! I can be a motivational speaker and go somewhere and I won't have to deal with this headache." See, as a marine, there's no "quit" in me. There's no such thing as "quit." But was the first time I gave thought to it. God said, "I'm not letting you quit. You're going to learn this lesson." He wouldn't let me run and quit. He said, "No, you're going to take this spanking like a man," and I had to.

(Rob) You know, it's interesting, Ted, you mentioned it, that being somebody's pastor doesn't mean as much today as it used to in the way that we see things.

(Tony) No, it doesn't.

(Rob) I'm reminded of what Paul said when he said, "The more I love, the less I am loved in return." I think we all experience that, especially in a situation like this. What I've seen about these types of situations is they don't just happen. There are always signs, there are always things that you see that are taking place. So I'm just wondering if you could go back to when you first started seeing signs of the storm taking place, is there anything maybe that you would have done differently if you could navigate that storm again?

(Tony) It's funny you say that because there are always warning signs to a storm. Always. I saw it begin to take place and I tried to ignore it. The reason why I tried to ignore it was because I was spiritually not in a good place

to be able to properly deal with it. So what I did was I started avoiding going to the church. So what would happen is that I heard, especially on Thursdays, because at that time I was studying for Sundays on Thursdays - at that time. So I stayed home to study and I heard they were ripping me up one side and down the other because I wasn't there. Well, I heard these things and of course it was going to get back to me, but I was just not in a good place so I couldn't properly deal with the signs. So, you know, like back our way, with hurricanes and such, they prepare. When people know a hurricane is coming they put wood on the windows and try to nail things down and stuff. I was not spiritually in a place where I could put wood on the windows and nail things down, even though I saw the storm coming. I saw it. I saw it as clear as day. I saw the signs. There was a little rebellion with the guys. I would say, "Hey, let's do it this way." And they'd go, "No, we'll do it over here." That's unusual for me because I'm a Marine. We're about taking orders. You take orders, you follow them through. It's as simple as that. So they were starting to rebel against those things and I saw it. And I said, "I see what's happening here," but I just couldn't properly deal with it because I was just not in a good place.

(Ted) Yeah, I think about that in experiences that I've had where we've had division or groups of people leave or whatever, and it always comes down to that element of lack of communication because really, when you get to it, that's kind of what you're talking about here, right?

(Tony) Yeah, yeah.

(Ted) It's sort of like, "I'm not going to deal with that," or, "I'm not going to address that." Or, "I see that." So it always comes down to that issue of communication and a lot of times we have so many things on our plates, right?

(Tony) Yeah, yeah.

(Ted) I'm thinking, "I've got enough plates spinning right now! I don't need to address that because, frankly, I've got bigger fish to fry." But then these things can grow up and blow up. I think about my ministry and the lack of

communication can be one of those danger things. Rob, you were talking on a previous episode about how you refill your tank and how you avoid burn out and all and you were talking about how you were out working in the backyard and how you mentioned to Denise, "I was out here for eight hours and not a single person talked to me!" And you said how glorious that was! Sometimes I think we fall into that trap of thinking, *Man, less is more! I don't want to deal with that.* But that lack of communication can be so toxic, right?

(Rob) Yeah, this is my experience. I went through a situation like this. I actually was trying to spark conversation. I was being very proactive, saying, "Hey, let's talk about this," but was hitting a wall, you know? I had several friends that told me, "Hey, this is not going to get better. This is only going to get worse." And I ignored that, but I will say that my heart was right. I was thinking, *No, God's going to heal this. God's going to deal with this.* But I'll tell you now, having gone through that and seeing our staff go through a situation like that, I am a bulldog now when it comes to any sign of that disgruntledness happening between different people on our team. I'm like, "We're nipping this in the bud right now!" Like Jesus said, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." All it takes is just a little bit and you let it fester and it can grow.

(Tony) Yeah!

(Ted) Yeah!

(Rob) Oftentimes it turns into something that it never should be and sometimes that happens because of a lack of communication because you have two people on a team and they start getting into their own headspace and they're thinking things that aren't true, you know? It just turns into a horrific mess, so for me, I just jump on that. But I want to ask you, Tony, what are some of the safeguards you put into place to avoid that type of thing happening again? I mean I don't know if we can ever fully avoid it because the body of Christ is full of sinners and we're all broken, but I do think that as leaders we can put safeguards into place. What are some of the things that you've done?

(Tony) For me, I make sure that I am at a place spiritually that I can hear from God, that I can speak the truth in love. Even if it's like a bulldog, like you said, but speak it in love, and remember that they're God's people, they're His sheep and we are going to give an account of how we deal with God's sheep. So I have to be at a place spiritually where I can properly deal with the sheep, even if it's in a corrective kind of way. So that's one thing. And our staff and our team now know that I just won't take mess anymore and when I see the signs, because I have experience now, so when I see the signs, I'm jumping on it like you. And, on top of that, our wives are just...I mean they need an extra jewel in those crowns, having to deal with us! My wife will know if I'm going "Rambo," if I'm going "Marine," and she will always bring me back because she loves me and so she wants the best for me. So even when I've dealt with staff in a harsh kind of way or I've spoken in a way that is hardcore, when we're at home - because she's on staff too - so she will say, "You know, today when you said..." and I'll say, "You don't have to say it. I got convicted of that as well." She keeps me balanced with that and I know she has my best interest at heart. So our wives are critical in keeping us at a place. As far as a safeguard, my wife is critical. Now a lot of people will say, "Well, you know, that's your wife. She's biased." Not mine! No! No!

(Laughter)

(Ted) I would say the same thing!

(Tony) When you've been married like us, for you know, thirty some years, the thing is, she's going to let me know; she's always going to tell me. I tell the church, "Keep my wife in prayer because if I'm on the fence about something, she can sway me to either side."

(Ted) That's so wise.

(Tony) So I said, "Here's the thing, if I'm uncertain, my wife will always ask me, "What is the Lord saying? How is the Lord speaking to you? What does God's Word say about that?" Because she understands, as I always tell people, the man is the head but the wife is the neck that turns the head. She understands that power and

influence she has but she never abuses it.

(Ted) Praise the Lord!

(Rob) I love that! I'm married to a woman who is just ultra sensitive. She is so clued into people's feelings!

(Tony) Yeah, yeah.

(Rob) So she's "over the top" sensitive, but it's so good for me because she'll reign me in at times where I might be harsh or I didn't even think it was harsh but she thought it was harsh...

(Tony) Sure! Yeah.

(Ted) Yeah, right.

(Rob) ...so I got to step back. I just want to say *this* because I love what you said about, you know, being in the proper place with the Lord because I used to respond a lot without prayer. Even though I say, "I'm going to deal with something like a bulldog, there is - and I've learned this - that first step of saying, "I got to really pray about this. I need God to direct me in this." But then, when I'm going to deal with it, it's got to be strong. Because the problem I made, I think, was being passive.

(Ted) Yeah, you know, Rob, as you're talking about that and the idea of having your wife to be faithful to speak into your life and having the humility to hear those things and then that willingness to take ownership of it, I think taking it to that next step to where, I think sometimes our staff needs to hear us, just like our kids need to hear us confess and say, "When I did this, it was wrong and I need to ask you guys for your forgiveness in this direction." Or even, "Hey guys, I've been convicted of the Lord in this way." I think that's so important. And, in addition to that, Proverbs 27:23 gives us the counsel to be diligent to know the state of your flocks and to attend

to your herds. So it's not only the Holy Spirit's directed wisdom and our diligence and cooperation with the Holy Spirit to be aware of ourselves, but to also be aware of our staff. I had a guy come to me years ago and he was basically pitching his case. He wanted me to share my pulpit with him. He had been serving in the church and he had incredible gifts, you know. He had been a senior pastor at some point in his history and so the way he pitched it was he said, "Hey, I don't want to deal with church budgets..."

(Laughter)

(Ted) "...and I don't want to deal with staffing issues and I don't want to deal with counseling and all that stuff, I just want to preach." And I said, "Let me stop you right there. Let me tell you what you just told me." I said, "Metaphorically you just told me you're wife's hot and I want to date her. I don't want to pay the bills, I don't want to take out the trash, I don't want to raise the kids." I basically said, "Get your own wife!" My discernment on this guys was, "No, no, no, no, no. Your heart and mind is in the wrong place and one of us needs to go and it ain't going to be me."

(Tony) That was good.

(Ted) But that was a discernment moment to be able to have the Lord speaking to me, you know?

(Tony) Yeah, yeah, I like that.

(Rob) Both of you have keyed in on this...Ted, a little differently than you did Tony, but it is very important for us to remember that this is the Lord's bride. This isn't my church; it's His church. One of the things that He says in His list of the seven things that He hates is he who sows discord among the brethren. So it is our responsibility as pastors to seek to nip that in the bud as best that we can. I think one of the ways too, when we talk about safeguards, is to me staff relations, staff care, team environment. I mean, we have a weekly staff meeting.

(Tony) So do we.

(Rob) Every single Tuesday we get together for at least an hour and a half and it is just so important for us to do that; to stay on the same page, to stay connected. Sometimes it's sharing. Sometimes it's praying together. Sometimes I'm teaching. Sometimes somebody else is teaching. It's just that sense of like, "Hey, where are we going? What is God doing here? What are some of the needs that are happening here?" The enemy so much wants to bring division that I think we have to really, really work hard at fighting against that. Even with our board, we call it our leadership team, we meet monthly and it starts with a meal and then we actually have worship together.

(Tony) Oh, ok!

(Rob) We take this from the passage, I think it's in Acts 13, where it says concerning the elders in Antioch that they ministered to the Lord and then the Holy Spirit spoke. So we like to begin every single time by ministering to the Lord as we are seeking the Holy Spirit to speak to us, you know? But again, it's building that sense of unity and that connection and being able to be vulnerable in situations, although that *can* backfire on you because people will take vulnerability and they'll use it.

(Tony) Sure, sure.

(Ted) Well, and along those lines too, Rob, being in unity doesn't necessarily mean that we're all in the place where God wants us because sometimes being in unity means to be discerning to recognize the Holy Spirit's work. Like, you know, "Separate unto Me Saul and Barnabas to the work to which I've called them." This can happen when you have somebody who the Lord really shows you, "This person has a gift or a calling that ain't *here*." And I think it's best sometimes to have a conversation way on the front end about that. I'm guilty of this sometimes - to where I'm thinking like that pastor in Antioch who was told, "Separate unto Me Saul and Barnabas," and who's thinking, *But these are my best guys!* But having that generous attitude like you were

talking about earlier today, Tony, when you were talking at our pastor's breakfast. It's just having that generous attitude to where we're willing to give away and sometimes that's part of it to where we recognize, "This guy's amazing and I can't think of life here at our church without him, but God has shown me that his future doesn't involve here."

(Rob) Well what's interesting about that too, Ted, is I think sometimes there are situations where you have somebody who is literally in sin and like they came at you and it was wrong, you know? They were attacking the shepherd and it was going to destroy the church, but at other times you have somebody and I think anybody who has been an assistant pastor goes through this, where there starts to be a little disgruntled-ness and where you start looking and thinking, "If I were the lead pastor, I would do it this way." And that can actually be a sign that God is stirring somebody up to go out, you know? As they're starting to see things, like, "Oh, if I was the pastor I would do it this way." Or they're starting to question, "I wonder why Rob does that?" So I think it's good to talk about it when you see that type of thing happening. How do you discern if this is somebody that maybe God is stirring up to go out, versus somebody who is just stirring up strife? What's the difference? What's the defining marks you think in that?

(Tony) You know, one thing, it's funny you say that because the two are different. There is a disgruntledness, an unsettledness that will take place. I remember when Troy and I were on staff and it began to take place with us... but, and I can only speak for me, but at no time did I want to try to undermine the pastor or anything like that. It was just a stirring that it was time for me to leave the nest, that's all it was. When folks begin to start sharing their disgruntledness with other staff members, with other church people, then it's time for you to go. And I saw it happen, you know, when assistants speak. Of course when people are at a church that teaches, there are always going to be people who will be like, "Oh, that was so great!" because they are so used to some good teaching. So when the assistant pastor is going to speak I tell him, I tell them all, I say, "Look, when you get up and teach, the people are going to praise you." I said, "That praise is like helium! It will blow your head up!" I said, "Let it go in one ear and out the other." Back in our day we used to say, "Don't believe the press clippings about yourself." Now it's like, "Don't believe the social media hype about yourself." I say, "Don't do it!" And sure enough

a couple of the guys back in the day taught and they started hearing this stuff and they started thinking more highly of themselves than they ought. The difference is that the guy who's ready to go out will still support the pastor and the church and he will just wait until the right time to go. The guy who is disgruntled that needs to go will just spread stuff to the staff and the people at church. This one guy I know, after he taught, somebody told him - and this was back in the day - "Oh, you sold 60 tapes!" That was back in the day with cassettes. "You sold 60 tapes!" Then this guy made the statement - out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks - and he said, "You know, I can split this church." And he shared that with another staff guy and that guy went back to the pastor and told him and sure enough the pastor got that guy in and said, "You're out!" So that's the difference; both show signs of disgruntledness but one will still be supportive, still hold up the arms of the guy who is the senior pastor, but the other will begin to spread it like leaven and it'll begin to leaven the whole lump and you got to get rid of them.

(Ted) You know I came through the Fire Service that was my background and...you know, this is a bad term in Europe, specifically in Ireland, I came to learn...but there's the term "paramilitary." In an American context a paramilitary organization is a military-like organization in terms of structure. All of that to say that this, that growing up in the Fire Department, and this is your experience, Tony, in the Marine Corps, that you respect authority. That's the way you tick. Even if you don't respect the *person*, you respect the *position*.

(Tony) Yes. Yes.

(Ted) And so that was my upbringing growing up but some people either haven't learned that, or they're dealing with different demons to where they can't execute that. But in general, you can train for that, you know, because they train Marines to think that way. I think it's healthy, in training your staff, to train them to respect the position because it's God ultimately who calls and places us. He puts one up and puts another one down. So that's an important aspect of training. I see a lot of times you have to discern between it being a heart issue and a time issue. Because if I've got a guy who really knows this is what God's called him to and you leave him too long in the wrong position, then he's going to become embittered. Then you're going to have problems. So I think the

timing issue is really where discernment is necessary for the lead pastor to be able to say, "God's got more for this guy and I need to get this guy ready because he's going to be going out."

(Rob) Sometimes that guy doesn't even know it.

(Ted) Oh yeah! I've had arguments with guys. I had one guy tell me, "I'm glad you feel that way, but I'm going to be here until the rapture!" Then five years later, no, we sent him out.

(Rob) But they're in that place where it's comfortable, they got a paycheck, they love the church, they love what they're doing, but you start to see this discontent happening. But you're right, they have a great heart, they still respect the chain of authority, they're not spreading it, but you can see it. You're having conversations with them where you just sense, "Man, he seems really bent out of shape about that."

(Ted) He's really frustrated about things, right.

(Rob) I've had that conversation, "Bro, I think God's wanting to send you out. He wants you to go plant a church." Sometimes it's hard for them to see that. But I remember when I was at Vista with Bryan, when I was on staff there, I reached a point after about six years that I knew. I start thinking, *Why is he doing this like that?* I was questioning a lot of things like, *Boy, I would do it this way.* Now I wasn't sharing any of that with anybody; it was all internal, what was going on with me. Then God sent me to go plant a church but here's what's interesting. I went and tried a lot of things that I thought would be the better way or whatever and then I came to realize, "Oh! Now I understand why he did it like that! Boy! That didn't work!"

(Laughter)

(Rob) Then I saw the wisdom in everything, but God was using that because I was the guy you were talking about who if people would have asked me, you know, "How long do you think you will be on staff at Vista?" I

would have said, "I'll be here until the rapture. I'm loving what I'm doing!" Then I hit a point about six years in where something shifted and changed and I started having this wrestling. So I say that to anybody who's listening, that's an ok thing. Understand it doesn't mean they're doing it wrong at your church. Or you read this great book and thought, *Oh, this is the way that we should be doing it.* But it might be that God's doing something in your heart because He's wanting to send you out and that can be a beautiful thing. Versus, if you don't understand that and you start, in your pride thinking, *Well, I really know what's best.* Then you start sharing that with other people and there will always be people who will agree with you. There will always be people who will jump on that bandwagon.

(Ted) Oh yeah. I so agree with you Rob. And you know, Tony, you said, "God doesn't bless mess," and I think about that because I've given this counsel to so many, to say, "Don't be the guy who splits a church. Don't be the guy who leaves out the back door and starts something down the street. You don't want to be *that* guy. Be the guy who leaves out the front door, who leaves in a right way, in a way of integrity because God blesses that."

(Tony) He does.

(Rob) Let's talk about this...because this just reminded me of something here because sometimes this happens in a ministry where you have somebody who's on staff and maybe they get some other ministry drawn to their attention and they're like, "Oh, I really love how they do that! I think we should be doing that." This type of thing. I've seen it happen where maybe somebody is leading one aspect of the ministry, but they're no longer in a place where they are in support of the pastor and the vision and the direction, but they say, "I'm going to stay here because God's using me in this thing and this is my ministry that I'm doing." What would you say to that person who is wrestling in that way because sometimes they're battling in their mind and in their heart and it's not healthy.

(Ted) Right.

(Rob) It is not healthy for the church because it eventually will rise to the surface. What would you guys say to that person who says, "I feel like I'm supposed to stay here because I'm the High School pastor and God's doing an amazing thing with these kids."

(Ted) I've got a lot to say on this, but I want to hear you first, Tony.

(Tony) Because of my experience, and because you said that he's no longer in support of the pastor? He has to go.

(Ted) Yeah, yeah.

(Tony) Don't let the doorknob hit you! But he has to go!

(Laughter)

(Ted) Right!

(Tony) Because it's leaven and it's going to leaven the whole lump. John Maxwell, in his book, talks about, "Don't let any grass grow under your feet." So often, like you mentioned before, we just don't want to have to deal with that because we have bigger fish to fry. But, when we just let it go, it becomes leaven and leavens the whole lump and it's this big thing and then we are pulling out this big tumor of a cancer but when it was just a little spot and we saw it, because God showed it to us, he just needs to go.

(Ted) You hit the nail on the head and Rob, you set it up in the question that, "Hey, I really like what they're doing over here." What that tells me is that you've stopped being their pastor and somebody else is now their shepherd. Somebody else is now their pastor. Then the other toxic part of the scenario that you painted is that they're viewing the ministry as a compartmentalized thing where they're saying, "I'm really doing a good work

here." But it's like, "No, no, no, this is the body of Christ, which is so many ministries, but this is *this unique local body of Christ* and none of us operates independent of one another. There needs to be that unity of thought and of purpose so when a guy's got an attitude that says, "This is my little corner of my empire," his head is in the wrong place.

(Tony) Yeah, yeah, you know one thing...I'm sorry to cut you off...but one thing we had to do is what's commonly called, in the church world, "alignment." The church had a mission statement, then the young adults had one, and the children's ministry was doing their thing and all these ministries became islands. So I had to bring them back into alignment so that at Calvary Chapel Newport News we teach the Word to reach up, in, around and out. Ok, our young adults, they're teaching the young adults to reach up, in, around and out. The children's pastor, they're teaching the children to reach up, in, around and out. We had to bring alignment because they were floating off and becoming their own islands that were floating out...like in Genesis when the earth was divided. These ministries were islands in and of themselves and I had to bring all that back into alignment.

(Ted) Man, when you talk about alignment, that is so good, because by God's grace, I don't know that we've experienced a church split, but I'll tell you one thing that we did experience which has a lot of similar aspects. We had a church merge into us and you know, it's been said that when two churches merge, one of them needs to die. And one of these churches that merged into us had all of these islands. They were a very unhealthy church and they had been circling the drain for a lot of years. So you had all of these independent groups, all these independent islands and they all had a plan of what was going to happen in that church.

(Tony) Oh, ok!

(Ted) So when the decision was made, and it was a very courageous decision by the pastor and the elders and the board at that time, that they were in fact going to merge with us, that it was going to go in that direction, these factions lost their minds! They just lost their minds! We're actually going to be doing an episode in the future on church mergers so I'm looking forward to that, but on average, when churches merge, only about

twenty percent of the people make the journey. I would say in that situation the end result was pretty close to the average. It's crazy what you end up dealing with in that because you've got independent people that want to oppose that direction and it comes down to unity. We all have to be in alignment.

(Tony) Yeah, we have to, especially with that church merger thing, wow! That's tough! That's tough! It's almost like when a company buys another company, the first thing they do is fire the CEO and they get rid of all these folks. Why do you have to fire the CEO? Because the company went down under his watch!

(Ted) Yeah, if the company was doing a good job, they wouldn't need to be bought out!

(Tony) Exactly! So you have to bring some alignment, bring some vision, bring some clarity and all that kind of stuff, but yeah, church merger is tough. Just like a church split, a church merger has it's own nuances and things that you experience.

(Ted) Well yeah, a component of a church merger is a church split because you will get it. It's inevitable.

(Rob) Yeah, so, as we kind of wrap up this conversation, Tony, I just want to ask you, first of all - Ted, you can jump on this but I've got another question for you - but let's picture there's a guy out there who's just gone through this. He's just experienced this and he's going to listen to this podcast, what's your word of encouragement and insight for that brother?

(Tony) I would tell them, "You're going to make it. You are going to get through this. God is going to get you through this. He wouldn't have brought you to it, if He wasn't going to bring you through it. Sure enough, you're going to get through it. You don't see how, but all things work together for good. You don't see how any good is going to come from this, but it will because God is using this for a reason. He has allowed it by His grace and mercy and His sovereignty. He has allowed it for whatever reason and you're going to get through it. He's going to get you through it."

(Ted) Don't grow weary in doing good for in due season you will reap if you don't lose heart.

(Tony) Yeah, and I almost lost heart and God said, "I won't let you. You need to learn this lesson."

(Rob) He's faithful to His church.

(Tony) He is.

(Rob) That's so good. Ted, for you, what would you say to a pastor who is in a situation right now where he is seeing maybe the early stages amongst some people on his team and this isn't healthy. What would be your word of encouragement to that guy?

(Ted) I would start with the big takeaway that Tony had. I think the starting place is that you need to take a prayerful walk with God to be able to say, "What are You teaching me through this?" We have all experienced those times where it's a very painful season but with the experience of hindsight we see that the pain we were going through, oftentimes, was God breaking us. So that's where I think it is such a healthy and mature place to start, to be able to say, "What ownership do I have in what they're dealing with?" And following up with that, communication is the key and you need wisdom and discernment. The Bible promises that if we lack wisdom and we ask God for wisdom, He will give it to us liberally and without reproach. Whenever I have a congregant or a minister or staff member, really anybody, ask me, "How can I pray for you?" I say, "The first thing you can do is to pray that God will give me wisdom and discernment." We need more of that every day! Truckloads of it! So to have the wisdom and discernment to say, "How do I navigate this?" And, as well, "Lord, you know what You're calling this guy to. Is this a situation where it's a teaching? Is it a humbling? Is it a "come to Jesus" kind of "check your heart" kind of situation? Or is it like Moses? I mean Moses got a sense of what God was calling him to do and what did he do? He jumped out ahead of God and killed the Egyptian, right? Sometimes guys get a sense of what God's calling them to do but they jump out ahead of God so I think wisdom is indicated there. That gives us

the opportunity to say, "Here's what I see in you. I see that God has more for you and I want to be part of preparing you for that. But, I also want you to be part of the willingness to at some point take a venture of faith." That's so important and I'll just shut up with this last thing. When it comes to a venture of faith, a lot of the mistakes I've made as a pastor is that I've tried to protect guys from that painful part of trusting in God. Sometimes you try to help guys too much and *you* become the problem. What guys need to learn and what we need to exhort them to is, "No, you need to be on a venture of faith to where it's you and the Lord and if He doesn't show up you're sunk. And if you're mad, you're dealing with Him because He's the One who's doing this."

(Tony) Let me just say this in closing, one of the things some guys, younger guys, need to realize, even though God will get them ready, but one of the things they have to realize is they can't be like a Ahimaaz who wanted to run but didn't have a message. You want to make sure that you are ready. Make sure that God is calling you. Even if someone goes out a little too soon, God will still get them ready. God will show them that He's faithful to get them ready, but you know, just like Ahimaaz wanted to run and he didn't have a message, we want to make sure that the person who is thinking about this is a person of the Word, a person of prayer, and that when God sends them out, you know, He's still going to get them ready. *He's still going to get them ready.*

(Rob) I think one of the things that we all need to remember in this, as pastors and as we're leading, - and you touched on this Tony - that God is *always* wanting to do something in us. He's *always* wanting to be changing and transforming us. A lot of that comes through the people that we work with. I remember one of my funnest seasons in ministry was when I had about six guys on staff with me who, I'd say, were all kind of "type A," all just driven. So we were all just running together like in one direction, but aside from our weekly staff meeting we didn't have to have a whole lot of interaction because we were all just going for it, you know? It was like one of the funnest times and those guys all went out and started churches and did all that, and then the Lord brought another group of guys who needed a lot more attention, a lot more of my time.

(Tony) Yeah! Yes!

(Rob) It took me a little while to recognize it because I was so used to like, "Yeah, you're going and I'm going and we're all going together." No, no, no, this was a new season. Now it's like, "I'm wanting to do something new in you." That can be difficult and so you hit the nail on the head, Ted. I think it starts with a little bit of introspection, "God, what are You wanting to do with me? What are you seeking to teach me?" And Tony, I'm so glad that you shared that and just were vulnerable to share that because I remember when you were going through all that and I remember some of the conversations when it was a little bit more in that "blame" season...

(Tony) Yeah, yeah, it was.

(Rob) ...and my heart was breaking for you because I know what that feels like and that sense of like, "Man, I'm done. I'm out of here," and how difficult that can be on the wife. I'll just say too that I think sometimes when our wives see us being hurt, they can kind of be like little mama bears!

(Tony) Oh sure, sure!

(Rob) They get hurt and they are hurting for us. There was a lady in our church in Oregon and this family had taken in a young girl who was pregnant. They took her all the way through her pregnancy, paid for everything, bought the baby clothes.

(Tony) Oh! I know where this is going!

(Rob) They had just totally poured into this girl. She has her baby and after a couple of months, living in their home - and that wasn't the long term plan - but they were just trying to help her, but they came home one day and she was gone and she had stolen things from them.

(Ted) Wow!

(Rob) She had hooked up with the baby's dad.

(Tony) Of course.

(Rob) And then they just ran off. This lady, the mother of that family was...

(Tony) Devastated.

(Rob) Oh yeah, devastated, and she said, "I will never do that again." I said to her, "Hey, you can't say that because we're called to be like Jesus and Jesus made Himself vulnerable and gave Himself to people who He knew would forsake Him."

(Ted) Such good counsel.

(Rob) He knew these people would betray Him and that's what He calls us to do; we are to die daily. I think it does all come back to, for us as pastors, that we're called to lead. But, I always say that I want to hold the church in the palm of my hand, but *not* with a tight grip, not where the Lord is trying to pry my fingers off, but just in the palm of my hand with a loose grip because it's His. I let Him lead and direct and show me and I realize that a part of what this is all about, is what He's seeking to do in me as His child.

(Tony) You know, just along with what you said, I have developed a phrase because our area is a military area meaning they can be there three years and then they're gone. Let's say they find the church after being there two years then that means we only have them for a year and then they're gone. So I tell people and I always got to explain it, I say, "We have learned to love people loosely." It's just what you're saying; we love 'em but we're not hugging them tight, we love them loosely because we know at any time they can either get mad at me, or Uncle Sam, or somebody is shipping them out, and they're gone! So we've learned to love them, just like you

said, *loosely*.

(Ted) That is so much easier said than done though, isn't it?! I mean it's really hard.

(Rob) Yeah.

(Tony) Yeah, because we're pastors! We want to hug tight and hold on because we're loving the sheep! It's tough.

(Rob) I like to think of it in this way. We are in a military community as well. Not quite as big as yours but we have the military families come in and you're loving them and then they're getting shipped off somewhere. But I always think about it this way - they're taking a little piece of us where they're going.

(Tony) Yeah.

(Ted) Yeah.

(Rob) It's almost like a missionary. It really changed my perspective but Jon Courson said something to me once to me that has really stuck with me. He said, "You know, I think God brings people into a church for a reason and it could be for a season. It could be a week. It could be a month. It could be a year. It could be ten years. He's bringing them in because He wants to impart something into them from that church. Maybe it's the church's flavor, or their DNA, or their heart, or their style that's going to impact them, but He has also brought them in because he wants to impart something from them into that church. It's a season and they're His sheep so when people move on, it's like, hey, it's ok, they're God's, they belong to Him, amen?"

(Tony) Amen!

(Ted) Amen! Brenda had a pastor's wife say to her at one point, "They all leave. They all end up leaving." Just in a real painful sense and there's a lot of truth to that. I remember crying out in my heart to the Lord one day and I said, "Why do people have to leave? Why can't they stay?" And He said, "That's heaven. Heaven is where everybody stays."

(Rob) That's good!

(Tony) Wow, that's good. That's awesome!

(Rob) Well guys, this has been a really impactful, insightful, and I think very important conversation. Tony, thanks so much for being with us today!

(Tony) Thank you for having me. I enjoyed every minute of that.

(Rob) We always love hearing from you, buddy!

(Ted) It's an absolute blessing to have you out, Tony! Your insights too, Rob, they were great. I appreciate that.

(Tony) Oh yeah, yeah.

(Rob) Thank you for listening. Our goal with this podcast is to help you lead well through all seasons and challenges of ministry life. So we'll see you next time on the Leadership Collective.

