

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 seasoned 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.

Rob

Today on the Leadership Collective we are talking all things Christmas. This is our last episode of 2021 and this will be our November episode so hopefully this will help give you some ideas of what to do and maybe what not to do when it comes to planning Christmas Eve and Christmas services. Ted, why don't you introduce our guest today?

Ted

Yeah, we're joined today by Jason Duff. He is the pastor of the Garden Fellowship in Bermuda Dunes, California. He used to be on staff with you, Rob.

Rob

He was...twice!

Ted

Yeah, and we have Brian Bell as well with us and he's the senior pastor of Calvary Chapel Murrieta. I've known both these guys for a number of years. Certainly I've known Jason as long as you have, Rob, but I've also known Brian for twenty-some odd years. He's been pastoring here in the community and a great guy. Guys, it's just a

blessing to have you both with us.

Rob

Yeah, I love both those guys. And yes, Jason was on staff with me, and Brian and I go so far back that we actually did youth ministry together! So back in the eighties! We're talking way back! But today we're going to be sharing our stories of the things that went horribly wrong as it relates to Christmas services.

Ted

Bah humbug!

Rob

Yeah, you can learn from our mistakes as we kind of humble ourselves. Then we'll talk about things that God really blessed. So we hope that you enjoy this episode of the Leadership Collective. Welcome to the program, guys!

Jason

Glad to be here! Glad to be a part of it!

Rob

Good to have you here, Jason!

Brian

Thank you so much, Rob. Glad to be here also.

Rob

It's good to have you guys. So we're talking about all things Christmas and I want us to humble ourselves a little bit and talk about things that have gone really, really wrong and also some things that we've seen God really,

really bless. But I want to start off by just asking this question, "Have any of you done the live animal thing? Have any of you had live animals at any of your services before?"

(Laughter)

Jason

Not yet, but the plan is for this year. So unless you guys talk me out of it by the end of the podcast here, yes we are. We're planning on doing it this year while we have our brand new building.

Rob

Camel?

Jason

Camels, goats, all kinds of animals, sheep...

Rob

The whole deal! I'm jealous! I've always wanted a camel out front.

Jason

...yeah, a whole weird petting zoo!

Ted

Right!

Rob

Have any of you done that?

Ted

Nope, never done it.

Brian

We did it once for our school and we had it in our gymnasium and we had all those animals in there and we had fleas for about the next month!

Rob

Oh! There you go!

Brian

So we swore we'd never put them inside again! We're keeping the animals outside from now on! We're not letting them come in. We did learn from that!

Rob

Yeah, because the guys who do it inside, I always wondered, when that camel has an accident, who cleans that up?! You know?!

Ted

Yeah, you just tell them not to feed it in close proximity to your service times!

Jason

Our camel is fasting, ok, before the Christmas service.

Ted

I did have a guy ask me if he could bring a horse into a service once to propose to his girlfriend. It wasn't a service, it was our concert series and we were doing it at another church. I told him no, I just said, "Two

thousand pound animals and people are a bad combination."

Rob

That's so true! Spoken like a former fire fighter right there! Oh man! So let's begin by talking about all the things that have gone wrong, like huge blunders, big mistakes, things that you went like, "Ok, we're never going to do that again!" Jason, why don't you kick us off on that.

Jason

You know, I think one of the biggest mistakes is - because like we'll talk about in a little while we do it as an outreach service - we have a lot of stuff going on and I learned that I need to preview, or at least have one of my staff guys preview everything that's to happen! Because one of the great ladies in our church wanted to read a poem as part of the choir performance and I thought, *That's great. Everybody knows the type of poem you should be reading at a Christmas event*, but it was more appropriate for some sort of a Halloween outreach! It was so dark! It was about death and the word "blood" was mentioned about eight times - *not* in reference to Jesus dying for us. So I'm watching all these people just go, "What is happening here?!" I thought, *I'm going to preview everything from this day forward!*

Rob

Oh man! What about you, Brian?

Brian

I'd forgotten, but about three years ago, just the color theme, the darkness, everything else, one of our leader's daughters at the end of it said, "Why is it so eerie and dark?" And we realized that we didn't mean to but it was just so solemn that it wasn't celebratory at all. The next year we just completely changed that. But one thing that came to my mind was when I was just going through my titles. I've been doing Christmas services since 1989, so thirty-two Christmases, and I was just looking at titles and one of them that I found was actually in 2008, and I did "The Original Grinch," talking about Herod. It's like, "Why would I choose Christmas to talk about Herod?" Ok

that was stupid, don't do that one!

(Laughter)

Rob

I remember one year we had a little kid's choir and we decided that we were going to do one of those machines that can blow out the fake snowflakes stuff. So we decided we were going to have these kids come up on the stage. They were going to sing but we didn't tell them about the snow. We wanted it to be a surprise to them. So they started singing and the snow starts falling and they get totally distracted! Kids wanted to jump off the stage and it was like a complete disaster! So from now on, anytime we're going to do the snow thing, we let the kids know ahead of time, like, "Here's what you need to do." Anything come to your mind, Ted?

Ted

Well a few things but just a commentary about kids, I think the beauty of involving the kids in the service is that even if it's a train wreck in the sense of the funny things that kids do, it's so endearing. People love it! Those actually end up becoming really good parts of the service. I think probably the biggest mistakes I think of have to do with timing and set up. I've learned that especially when we were a mobile church and we were doing set up and tear down and getting access to the facility is always an issue, like how soon can you get in there. And then, what exactly are you going to do to dress it up? We would misjudge how much time it was going to take us for certain things so we would find ourselves scrambling to get all the elements in place. So that could be a big take away lesson and that is to allow yourself more time to get those things set up. Even allow yourself time for a run through of a service to an empty room.

Rob

Yeah, we do that.

Ted

So that's helpful.

Jason

I think what we've leaned over the years is sort of the same thing. We used to plan like a month in advance and now we're like, "Six months in advance, still not enough time! Eight months in advance..." So we're already having our first meetings way in advance trying to think through all of those things now.

Rob

I remember another thing I did that was just dumb...I think I've probably done more dumb things than you guys have! So the theme of my message was on the idea of how we wrap up a present and it can be a lousy present but we wrap it up in really, really nice wrapping paper and how God kind of did the opposite. He took this gem of His Son and He wrapped Him in a very obscure thing. So I decided before my message, as I was kind of giving this intro, that I would have these presents up front that were all nicely wrapped - some were nicely wrapped and some weren't. I was giving the, "Ok, who thinks a woman wrapped this present and who thinks a guy wrapped this present?" that type of thing. The crowd was getting involved and we always have kids as a part of our service because we don't really do much childcare for that. We have nursery to kindergarten but the older kids are part of the service. We give our children's ministry people kind of that night off on Christmas Eve. So I decided I was going to have some kids from the audience come up and unwrap these presents and they were going to get whatever was in it. I had three or four presents and I picked three or four kids and I thought, *This will be really sweet*. Well, what ends up happening is those kids were super excited but every other kid in the place was super mad and their parents were mad! It was like, "How did those kids get picked?!" That kind of thing. So I learned that's something you don't want to do!

(Laughter)

Rob

Any other things come to you guy's minds? Blunders or...

Ted

Candlelight services where you get wax on the chairs.

Rob

You guys do the candlelight with real candles?

Jason

We do. It's just been a tradition for so long. People love it.

Rob

You do the dripless ones, right?

Ted

No, iPhones!

Jason

We do real candles but we don't have pews anymore, we have chairs. Now you just have to replace a chair instead of the whole pew!

Rob

Right!

Brian

There's the occasional scream from when the hot wax gets a small child and that is never great! But we do the candlelight Christmas Eve services too and there's always the occasional, "Ow, mommy!"

Ted

I had a service that we did and the theme was "Wrapped in Wonder" and they really went all out on the "wrapping and wonder" with their decorations and it ended up being referred to as our "Vegas" Christmas because of all the bling and everything that was in it. My wife talked me into wearing a tie that was a real sparkly tie that matched everything. I dug it. I thought it was all great!

Brian

Is this on video anywhere??!

Ted

Oh yeah, it is!

Rob

So did you actually call it the "Vegas Christmas?"

Ted

We did not. But it's known to this day as the "Vegas Christmas."

Brian

It's bad when your staff and all the people remember a certain Christmas and give it a theme title. That's not too good!

Ted

Right!

Rob

Man! Just another little thing that I remember, and it wasn't a big deal, but I think it's something that's worth noting. There was one particular year where our worship team planned a bunch of songs that tended to be more like special songs, like performance songs. They did a phenomenal job. I mean it was great, but I remember it left some of our people feeling like, "We didn't get to sing. We didn't have the carols. Everything just kind of had this concert feel." And that really wasn't the intent going into it, but it was just sort of the way it ended up happening. I learned from that, like there has to be a good mixture of that because people are coming to those services wanting to sing and celebrate the birth of Christ.

Jason

And where else do you get to sing Christmas carols? We ran into that same thing. Yeah. We try to balance them out.

Rob

Just out of curiosity, do you promote your Christmas services? Like, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, or whatever it may be, like the Sunday before Christmas, as more of an outreach or is it kind of geared toward the body? I know at our church it's kind of interesting that our Easter service is a major outreach! We do it at this beautiful amphitheater. It's more of a community event and we will get, like, I mean, twice as many people that come to that service than come to our church normally. But for Christmas, it's kind of odd that...I mean I've been at this twenty-five years now and even dating before that, our Christmas Eve and Christmas services never had the same type of impact, no matter how we framed them, built them, or encouraged people. I think what I came to realize is that a lot of people who live in Vista are not from Vista and so they tend to travel on Christmas Eve. They're going to wherever their parents are living. A lot of them are from Orange County. Our Christmas services have never had that same type of outreach effect so we've sort of, kind of, geared them a little bit more toward the body than toward the unbeliever, even though there is still always an evangelistic aspect to them. How have you guys approached that?

Jason

We do it as an outreach as well. I've kind of learned from you - as everybody may not know - I spent 22 years of ministry working for Pastor Rob Salvato...

Rob

Working with.

Jason

Working for and with!

(Laughter)

Jason

But the reality is, watching what Vista has done at Easter for so many years, it was always impressive for me to see the mass evangelism that was happening and the outreach that it was. So, when I had the opportunity to just pray, "God, what do you want *me* to do?" We did the same thing for Christmas, but I think what made it a little different for us, is that we also do that at a separate venue. I think when it's "in house" sometimes it's a little harder to have people have the same focus for inviting friends, inviting neighbors. I don't know why, because the service should be enough, but we all know that the reality is that a lot of Americans just feel an obligation to go to church on Christmas and Easter. Obviously that's just something in their hearts so we want to capitalize on that the best we can. So in renting out a high school gymnasium or something different from our facility, it really allows both Christmas and Easter to be an outreach. But I see the same things you were just talking about. There are a lot more people who are in town for Easter than we have for Christmas. You don't get as many visitors as you get for an Easter service for sure.

Rob

Was it the same when you were in Paris, Texas?

Jason

Yes, absolutely. The exact same.

Ted

I've taken a little different approach in regards to our Christmas services. I like the idea of people darkening our doorstep because sometimes just getting over the threshold of, "Ok, I've gone into that building and I didn't get struck by lightning and it actually was a kind of pleasant experience," then it kind of primes the pump that maybe they'll come back. So my philosophy is, "Let's get them in the building so that it lowers the threshold maybe for a repeat visit."

Rob

So you give cash prizes, right?!

(Laughter)

Ted

No, just getting them physically onsite, you know. But I think the focus for us has been equal parts focused on the body, and then as far as the other half of reaching out evangelistically to the community, you're right, I think there are a contingent of people who are gone. But our experience has been that those who are visiting family here kind of make up for that and so we see our Christmas numbers swell significantly. As I'm sure you guys do too. But yeah, we see them swell a lot.

Rob

Is it as much as like at an Easter service for you guys?

Ted

Yeah, I would say that it's dramatically more both at Christmas and Easter. They are obviously the most attended

weeks of the year.

Rob

How about you guys, Brian?

Brian

You know, I think it started more evangelical and then ended more like what Ted was saying where now it's more family inviting family, family that are in town, friends that are in town. It's kind of that same type of mindset that I heard from Pastor Rick that he had where he really encourages people to come into the building and learn that it's a safe place. Kind of along those same lines, that's what we've been doing. There were a few events we did like at Storm Stadium and different places where everything just got so far separated. Yes, a lot of people came, but it just felt so distanced. I was way out at second base where the stage was and it just felt uncomfortable. We were happy to get back in. I think you have to try different things at different times, but that's just what we've been trying lately.

Ted

We've had the opportunity, at our Easter services, you know, we have a local venue - it's an outdoor venue - and we kind of did a hybrid thing where we do our sunrise service out there. It is stripped down; it is not a bells and whistles kind of service. It is a humble guitarist and a singer, maybe two, and it's a really acoustic and fully stripped down, genuine sunrise service. Then we have our regular services onsite and it's been good because it's accommodated the increased numbers, but then it provides the best of both worlds because we have those people out in the community who we can reach also. It would be nice to do it at Christmas, but it's just too cold!

(Laughter)

Rob

Right. Right. So what are some things that you guys have found that you've done for Christmas Eve or Christmas

service that is a little bit different than maybe what you normally do on a Sunday that you found has been just really, really good that have just become a part of your DNA or that you've kind of chalked up like, "Oh, that went really, really well. We need to do that again." What are some of those things that you learned over the years, Brian?

Brian

I think, again, our tradition is that the last song is "O Holy Night," and we do the candle lighting no matter how many services that we do. I guess, before I answer that, I should say that growing up Catholic all my life we always have gone to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. We've always had service at eleven o'clock so that we were doing that right on midnight. Looking back over the years we did that in the beginning, but here's what we've found out. Every time we moved the service up, more people came. We usually do three services, so we moved it from ten to seven to five pm and then we did three, five, seven pm, and then one pm and five pm, and the earlier we move it, the more people come.

Rob

Really?

Ted

Yeah, more people come.

Brian

And that's what they've always said and I just thought, *No way. Absolutely not. They want to come late.* But no. I remember at the 11:00 pm service people would just take their kids, the little ones, and stick them underneath the pew and they would go to sleep but the earlier it is, it seems like the more that are coming out.

Rob

What times are you doing this year?

Brian

We're doing 3:00, 5:00 and 7:00 pm again. We were going to do 1:00, 3:00, and 5:00 pm and then we decided, "I think 1:00 pm is too early." I think it's on Friday this year, right?

Rob

I don't even know!

Brian

Yeah, I think Christmas Eve is on Friday this year and Christmas is on Saturday.

Jason

Yeah, because we were talking about if people could get in to that service if they were traveling. They're probably not going to be able to get there by 1:00 pm so we're staying with 3:00, 5:00, and 7:00 pm this year. One of the things we did that was my favorite, we called it "Love's Pure Light." It was a candle service but we included so many people to be involved. So basically on the stage we had five different areas of candles and the first one represented Mary, Jesus, and Joseph, and then I would talk about the family and them and their part of the story, and then somebody would light that candle and somebody would come up and read a portion in English and then somebody would read it in a different language.

Ted

Oh, that's awesome.

Jason

It was kind of tying in, "Good News for All People." Kind of that phrase but being that times five. The last was the witness angel, it was a living person who was there and it was about how we're still supposed to be sharing this message and instead of lighting the candle, it was one of our high schoolers that stood there with a candle. So it

was neat and interactive and the kids stayed locked in to it the whole time because it's a family service with all the kids. So that was one of my favorites.

Rob

I like that.

Jason

Yeah, it really tied in to everybody.

Ted

Yeah, that's great.

Jason

I don't know who I stole it from! Ha!

Ted

I'm making a note here, I'm going to steal that from you! That's fantastic!

Jason

It worked out really good.

Ted

We've discovered we want to have a choir element and we want to have a kid's element. But because we don't have a choir as part of our normal offering and the people in the body *love* to be involved in those kind of things, incorporating a choir element to the services is something that we do and the people enjoy it. Really I like to involve the kids, but the challenge with the kids, especially when you're doing multiple services, is the fact that what family on Christmas and Christmas Eve want to take the time out to do multiple services with their kids and

so on? So we tried, starting a few years ago, doing a special Christmas program for the kids in terms of one they could be participating in, like maybe doing a skit and those kind of things. We did a separate one just for them and it was just a kid's program where mom and dad and grandparents could all come out. It's not on Christmas and we had a lot of success with that. That was really good. I'm anxious to hear what you're going to say, Jason, so we'll do that, but I don't want to get too far away from something because we started to touch on Christmas falling on a Friday and all of that, and I think there's a lot of area in there to touch on in terms of, "Do you do an actual Christmas Eve service? What if Christmas falls on a Sunday. How does that work?" Because I know there are some churches that shut the church down. They don't have any services because it's Christmas! I'm like, "I'm glad Jesus didn't do that! We wouldn't have Christmas!" But at any rate...

(Laughter)

Rob

"Yeah, I'm not coming because it's a holiday!" said Jesus. That would be a big thing for all of us!

Ted

Right?!

(Laughter)

Jason

Yeah, I think for a lot of us, like us, we do Easter as something that's away from the facility. And I hear what you're saying, it does have the element where people aren't then used to coming to the church, but my philosophy is that I want them to get to know us because it's not just coming to the church, it's not just the building they're afraid of, it's pastors and worship leaders and all the weirdos that run the church!

Ted

Right!

Jason

So they hopefully get a chance to meet us in a venue that they're more comfortable with. But one of the reasons I love it is that we'll take the Sunday before Christmas, unless Sunday falls on a Sunday, and we'll deal with that in a little bit, but when it's the Sunday before, that's our big outreach. So just like Easter, mailers go out to the entire valley that we're having something special going on. But it's also one big giant service so the kids only have to come once and go through all their things once and it's not three or four services on Sunday morning.

Ted

Sure, right.

Jason

But then Christmas Eve for us is more for the family, for the body. We don't involve kids doing things at Christmas Eve for that exact reason because when you start to have multiple services it's hard for the kids to be able to do that. So we've seen it for a while as the Sunday before is our Christmas outreach, when we're reaching out to the community and we're doing that offsite. Then Christmas Eve is at our facility and we do candlelight for the family. Not that visitors don't show up, they certainly do, but the focus is more on ministering to our church body.

Rob

Now are you going to do that offsite after you move into your new facility, your new building? Your beautiful new Taj Mahal?!

(Laughter)

Jason

Yes, well, I think so, because again, we have been noticing that both Easter and Christmas are such large groups. We've noticed that Easter is maybe three times the size of our regular Sunday morning congregation and the Sunday before Christmas is maybe double the normal amount of people that show up. But again, it is less than Easter, but it still won't fit even in our new facility unless we did multiple services and I think that's where you get into problems with wanting to do special things in the service that you don't normally do and then you've got all these volunteers now working multiple times. Then do we do children's ministry or do we not do children's ministry? There's all this kind of stuff so our plan is to fully continue to do the offsite one big giant service the Sunday before Christmas and at Easter as well, even though we've got a bright, new big facility.

Rob

So this year the Sunday before is the 19th which will be six days before and so that probably works out perfectly.

Jason

Yep, it does.

Rob

That's cool. That's cool. It's an interesting idea. I've never thought about that. You should have mentioned that when you were on staff, Jason! We could have used the moonlight on Christmas! We might do that this year!

Jason

I couldn't give you all my good ideas! Just kidding.

Rob

But because of the family nature of the service and the kids being in there, one of the things that we've been doing for years that I've found to be personally really helpful and that I've liked, is we take the service and it's completely different from a normal service in that we intersperse music with short teachings. So we sing a few songs and then what we've kind of done over the years - and Jason did this with me - is we would pick a theme

and we would just basically take our message and we would divide it into like three - eight minute parts. I actually would team teach with either one other person or two other people and so one guy would kind of set up where we're going and the songs would kind of go with that. Then we would sing a few more songs and then there would be somebody else who would share kind of the second part of it. And we sort of did that mainly in order to hold the kid's attention, you know? Then we would wrap it up with the last part and I've really, really enjoyed that. I've enjoyed sharing the service with other guys, but I think that's been really, really helpful for the kids, especially for the younger kids, not having to try to sit for a thirty minute message, that type of a thing, you know?

Ted

I think holding the kid's attention is an important kind of asterisk to put by an argument for having a short service. We do this at Easter and we do it at Christmas. We aim for a strategically much shorter service than we would otherwise do.

Rob

What does that look like? How short are you talking?

Ted

Under an hour. And I do that because the kids are there and they're melting down and I want it to be a good experience. Parents *will* decide that they're not going to come - and I know this "anecdotally" from feedback that we get, but they'll make a decision, "I'm not bringing my three kids to that."

Rob

It's too long.

Ted

Yeah like, "That's too long and they will melt down and cause a scene and I'm going to lose my salvation!" So

yeah, we'll keep it short for that precise reason.

Brian

We shoot for an hour also. One of the things that we incorporated at both Christmas and Easter is having one of the pastors come out and speak to the kids for about five minutes. We have a craft for them that they're handed on the way in. They can either put it together or explain something about it, but it kind of gets them, especially the little ones, doing something or they have something to color, you know, or whatever, right at the very beginning of the service.

Jason

Yeah, we do the same thing. We hand them bags of stuff that they can do, but again, for us, we have children's ministry at the Sunday before Christmas so even though it's at a High School gymnasium, we rent other classrooms to have children's ministries. That allows me more time though the message isn't super long like it would be. I'm super long on a normal Sunday morning!

(Laughter)

Jason

For Easter and Christmas services I want to have opportunity to share the gospel and do those kind of things. The one service we do that is less than an hour is our Christmas Eve service. That's going to be short because the kids are in there, and yes, they've got bags and they can play with and do stuff.

Ted

Let me ask you guys this, speaking of Christmas Eve and kids. Children's ministry during that service. We wrestled with that. Are we going to do it? Are we not? The sanctuary is wide open, bring your kids in kind of attitude. Kind of where we've settled is we offer five and under children's ministry during the services. They're not well attended, most people want to keep their children with them, and that's great, but it makes a difference

for some. The trick is getting them staffed. But that's where we've landed. Where have you guys landed on that?

Rob

We do five and under at the first service only. The second service on Christmas Eve is open to anybody. We do have people who definitely take advantage of the childcare in the first service. Usually, like you guys were saying, when it comes like to the kid's choir or things like that, they don't want to be there for both so we only have the kid's choir at the first service and then at the second service we might have a little bit of extra music. I think our services are at the most like an hour and ten, so ours are maybe a little bit longer than yours, but definitely shorter than what we are doing now.

Brian

What we do is what you'd mentioned earlier, coming from the idea of giving all the people that work in the children's church that night off or that day off to be able to come in together with more the family feel. We haven't provided for it, but plus it helps all the adults in the church know why we do have a children's church the rest of the year!

Ted

Right! Actually that object lesson is good.

Brian

Just kidding...kind of!

Jason

We give them the option. I'll let moms bring their babies in if they want to, but we say weeks leading up to it, "You're responsible for your kids," but we do offer it and I've learned that from you. We offer it for kids five years old and under. We usually use a lot of our staff to run that on Christmas Eve so the body can be in the services and people who are part of our staff can be watching those kids. We give them both options because some

families who come will stay away if they have to be responsible for their kids because they just know it's just not going to happen. Others want their four year old sitting on their lap and that's great.

Rob

I think we're living in a completely different world today. The days of, "You can't have your kids in the sanctuary," are gone.

Ted

Yeah, those are gone.

Rob

That's over, period. We are so much more relaxed than we ever used to be. I mean there are people who don't want anybody to watch their kids.

Ted

And really that's a unique phenomenon for those of us who are of the Calvary Chapel background and heritage, but to people of other denominations that is just completely foreign to them, "What do you mean kids can't come into the service?" It's been the normal practice for others for a long time but I think it's a good evolution for us to be able to welcome the kids to come in and so on. So...Christmas Eve services philosophically, like just in general. Christmas Day services philosophically in general. I just want to see where you guys land on that. Let me give you a little bit more explanation just by way of decisions we've made. So over the years I've gotten some push back for, "Should we even have a Christmas Eve service? Shouldn't we, for the sake of the staff who work so hard and for others, shouldn't we just encourage people to be with their family? And my philosophy on that is, "No, because there are some in the community who have no family to go to and spend it with."

Jason

Yes, exactly.

Ted

Some who are coming to our services, the hug that they will get - COVID or no COVID - the hug they're going to get on Christmas Eve is the only hug they're going to get. So my attitude is yes, we are going to have a Christmas Eve service and yes, if Christmas Day falls on Sunday, we are doing church. Like that's just what we're going to do and it's business as usual, so to speak. So your guy's thoughts on those?

Jason

You know, I feel the same way in the sense that I have a hard time cancelling Christmas on Jesus' birthday just because it happens to be on a Sunday.

Ted

Right.

Jason

And again, the reasons are all that you stated, but I think - and I know everyone agrees with this - there absolutely needs to be a balance. Not this year, but next year, Christmas will be on a Sunday. The last time Christmas fell on a Sunday I remember two of my pastor's wives just weeping in the service and it wasn't because they were moved by my message! It was because they were upset that their husbands were *forced* to be at church that Sunday...so then we immediately fired them! Ha! No, just kidding. But the balance that we try to do is to be very generous with time off the week before and the week after Christmas. For us this year, with Christmas falling on a Saturday, it's not a problem. Christmas Eve falls on a Friday. Normally our staff work Sunday through Thursday so it is a day that they have to come in though it does happen to be their day off. So this year our staff are going to get Monday through Thursday off both weeks...both weeks. We're not going to do a Wednesday night service. We're going to focus on Christmas Eve and we're going to focus on worship night for New Year's Eve. My staff will have off those four days that they normally work, not as part of their vacation time but just, "Here, we want to bless you." I've already started talking about it like, "So, encourage your

precious brides that yes, you're going to be here on Christmas Eve, and yes, you may not be sitting with your family because maybe you're doing children's ministry, but we're going to give you these eight days that are not your vacation time beforehand to go be away and have family time." Because most of them understand as long as family is being emphasized, it doesn't have to be on that exact day, but there are still those who end up crying.

Ted

I'm so glad you bring that up because I came into the ministry by way of the Fire Service. I was a paramedic fire fighter before I was a pastor and you know, there were seasons when I worked a 72 hour shift. I worked the day before Christmas Eve, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day. My kids had Christmas earlier. Santa came to our house a lot earlier than the other kids. That kind of thing. So for me, my attitude was, "Well, suck it up. There are all kinds of occupations that have to work on this day and the ministry is just one of those settings where we do." But I'm glad you bring it up because it is something that we have to discuss with the staff. I like your suggestion about the week before and the week after. We do the week between Christmas and New Years where we just shut everything down and give the whole staff that time off and as you do, we don't charge their vacation or holiday time for that. I think that's really smart - what you were talking about - maybe even in anticipation giving them some time off, and thinking about it proactively. I think that's really wise.

Rob

I think one of the things that we have to think about too, as it relates to this, and I think this is a part of it too, sometimes something that people do forget and I think it's one of the things that we have to engrain in the mind of our staff as well as our people that are coming to the church, and that is that we have a tendency to view the church as what's happening in these four walls and we forget about the idea that there are people out there who are lost. And like Jason mentioned earlier, Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, and Easter are the two times in the whole year that people who aren't walking with Jesus are going to come so we have to take advantage of those opportunities. So we do the exact same thing that Jason mentioned. The week leading into it we reduce our hours and then we always have given the week between Christmas and New Year's off as a free vacation

basically and everybody knows that. But I do think that sometimes it can almost become a thing that some can kind of think their entitled to, like, "Oh, this is the normal thing," and they don't appreciate it maybe like they should. But we do that because we're focused on the idea that there is the aspect that we have to seize the opportunities and look forward to those opportunities and that is an opportunity for sure.

Brian

The only thing I'll add is one thing we're doing this year is pulling it out of the vacation policy because there are still some people, like your worship leader and people on staff that have to work during that week, which in my mind, I'm thinking, *Come on! I'm giving you the whole week off. What's the big deal about coming in for a Wednesday night service or whatever else?* And not that they're pushing against that, but there are a few that are like, "Wait I thought we had these days off and now we don't have these days off?" So we're just phrasing it to be what it really is, "The office isn't going to be open and unless you need to work, you're welcome to the rest of the time off, but only talk with your supervisor and make sure when you need to be there and when you can have time off and that's it." Like we have end of year finances and stuff like that so there are still a lot of people who need to come in and do stuff during the week.

Ted

Yeah, and I think towards that end, having that discussion proactively beforehand is beneficial. I think there's also room, and I think you alluded to this Brian, to look at those staff members who could be excluded because not every event has to be an "all hands on deck" event. So we can say, "Well yeah, we're going to have this service and you're not required to be here." So there may well be certain staff members who are not coming to the services, who have plans out of town or whatever, but still identifying the ones who are, "This is mission critical; you have to be here and it is required." I think that's important.

Rob

So I would just ask out of curiosity how you guys handle that when you have that?

Jason

I think like everything in our world, communication is really important. Our staff meeting is on a Monday and we literally just started talking about this. I know this is going to be put on later in the year so it's October when we're recording this, but I'm already talking to my staff about this. Again, being able to let them share their hearts and ideas, but sharing a lot of stuff that you just said, Ted. I think sometimes we can get the mindset that church is our *job* and so therefore I need my right time off and all of these kind of things. I think Wednesday night is a great example because we go back and forth with the staff saying, "Well, I should get off at noon because I have to be here on Wednesday night." And my philosophy is that most people who come in to work in children's ministry, those who come in to help you in youth ministry that night, or help with ushering, they've worked all day long. And at five o'clock they have a quick meal with their families then come rush to church and they're here serving. And again, I think there's a part of it where there always has to be a balance because we can get in that mentality where it's like, "Shut up, you're a pastor. You should figure this out and you should have a better attitude towards Jesus!" We can't be that because people have families. Of course all of us remember an earlier time in church ministry where pastors would sacrifice their families for the ministry, that's never good, but I feel a little like in our church culture today that the pendulum has swung to the other sense where pastors aren't willing to sacrifice anything.

Ted

Yeah, I would agree with you.

Jason

That's just not ok. We're dealing with the kingdom of God and we're dealing with people's souls so I start two months out going, "Hey, just so you know, here's what it's going to look like. I thought about you and your families and having to get away. Here's how we're doing to do that and then I want you here and I want you involved and engaged in all that's going on."

Ted

And having said all that - and I agree with absolutely everything you just said - I think there are those special occasions where you can be gracious with a staff member strategically.

Jason

Yeah, a great example of that is my family for Thanksgiving has always gone up to Reno, Nevada where my aunt and uncle live. We have this big family thing. Like the family comes from everywhere to be a part of it and Pastor Rob has always had a Thanksgiving Eve service on that Wednesday night. I just communicated that to him and was allowed to be away from that service because there's just no way to get there. It's not like they're going to change Thanksgiving - the holiday of it - and he was super gracious about just allowing me to do that. So there are, on a case by case basis, where you do allow that and say, "Yeah, I get that. I understand that."

Rob

Our Thanksgiving Eve service is a huge service! It's like a fan favorite at our church. It's music and testimonies and it's huge. But it's interesting because we do look at those types of services as an "all hands on deck" type of thing, but I do have a very gracious executive pastor and the way he handles it is kind of like first come first served. You know, we can't have everybody asking off but the guys who kind of get their request in first are the ones who get that granted. So he's looking at, "Ok, we've got three guys who are not going to be here because they're going to be out of town." That would be one of the reasons, that would be one of the examples, of why he would do that. Like Jason who would always go out of town. But if it gets to the point where ok, now we can't afford to have anybody else gone and then the next guy comes along, it's like, "Sorry, we can't afford to have more people gone. There are already three guys who have asked ahead of you. We can't do that."

Jason

Balance.

Ted

And again, experience in other sectors of the business world inform things like this. When I was in the Fire

Department it was ranked on seniority. There was a schedule that went out. You saw it a year in advance. You put in for your vacation time and it was by rank. So the captains all fell into rank first and based on "first come, first served," by the time it would roll around to you, you'd say, "Ok, well, I guess I get three days *after* Christmas off this year!"

(Laughter)

Rob

Any other things that come to your mind as you think about services through the years that you just found like, "This was a neat blessing"?

Jason

I think, you know, working with you for so many years at Calvary Vista, I appreciated the Thanksgiving Eve service that we did. When I was a youth pastor I wasn't gone during those times, it was just during the second time there. Our church has no idea what a Thanksgiving Eve service is because I just don't do it because I'm gone. But we take the Sunday before Thanksgiving and I've implemented all the things that you do on Thanksgiving Eve, we just do it on the Sunday before Thanksgiving instead. And it's awesome because, again, there is no other time during the year, at least at our fellowship, where three or four people get to get up and give a testimony of how God's been good to them that year. It's great for me because I get to know certain families in the body really well and hear their stories. So we do that the Sunday before Thanksgiving and it's awesome for our church to hear just the great things that God is doing in other people's lives. I think it fills them with faith that God's going to be faithful to them in what they're worried about and what they're facing.

Rob

Yeah, I think that whole testimony concept is one that is a little foreign to our Calvary Chapel heritage because we're so given to teaching the Word, but man, those nights are powerful. They're really, really powerful.

Jason

We do interview though, because the other problem is giving somebody a mic and saying, "You only have seven minutes," and twenty-five minutes later you're thinking, *Oh no! What's going on?*

Rob

Yeah, we hook them up to a little wire so they get shocked! Ha!

(Laughter)

Brian

A little electric shock?! Ha!

Jason

Yeah, it's like, "We will hold the mic for you."

Ted

We used to do a Thanksgiving Eve service. We did it every year. Then I read *Simple Church* by Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger. I took some principles out of that book and one of the principles was well, instead of a Thanksgiving Eve service, we could just take the Sunday before Thanksgiving and do an especially themed Thanksgiving service.

Jason

Yeah, that's what we do.

Ted

So we've done that and that eliminated a service and still fulfilled the need. Some other things that we do - and I think this would probably be a good lightning round for key things that you do - but we count everything. We're

like baseball, we count everything, but especially for the Christmas services! I was talking to my administrator earlier about this episode and just kind of priming my pump for this thing, and she reminded me that we keep track of service times, we keep track of how many donuts we buy, how many chairs we buy if we're augmenting chairs for a venue, the number of packets we put together for the kids, and those really inform our planning for the following year. Then we can really look at these actual numbers every year and it's not a "wet your tongue and just stick it up to the wind to see which way it's blowing," but you've got some numbers to look at and practically say, "This worked. That didn't." That practice you mentioned, Brian, about the service times and how the earlier services are more well attended? We discovered that as well. Our numbers showed us that these are the more popular services. So those are some things.

Jason

We do the same thing. We just forget who has the list every year! "Wait, I thought you were taking notes last year!"

(Laughter)

Ted

You need a "Shirley!"

Rob

Exactly!

Brian

That's great. I was just going to make mention that Wednesday night, Thanksgiving Eve, has been one of our biggest services. We do pumpkin pie afterwards and everything else and it's really a great service every year. Just today my wife had a great idea on connecting with our police department where everybody buys gift cards with five different dollar amounts from five different places. We'll probably come up with the amounts today. We

will give these to our police officers for them to pass out between Thanksgiving and Christmas. You're blessing them because everybody loves to give something away to somebody. So hopefully that will bless the police officers, but also bless those they're giving it to in the community. It's kind of a win, win, win. So we're going to try that this year.

Jason

That's a great idea

Ted

Excellent idea.

Rob

Love that. Do you guys do a Christmas series on the Sundays leading up to Christmas services? And if you do, why do you? And if you don't, why not? Jason, you're nodding.

Jason

Yeah, I do. As you know about me, I'm a very big planner so I kind of know where I am going through the Bible and what I'm going to need, depending on how many weeks from the last book. I want to start a new book when the holiday weeks are over so for me it does a couple of different things. Number one, it just kind of gives me a break from going straight through the scripture, and secondly, it helps me to build towards that special service we do the Sunday before Christmas. Last year we kind of did an adaptation of the book *Case for Christ* with, "The Case for Christmas" with just sort of evidences that this is not just a fairy tale that everyone believes but Jesus actually came and here's why. We built that week in and week out leading up to that Sunday before Christmas. So number one, the body is excited and maybe they have a reason to stay around - if they were thinking about going out of town - and then secondly, again, it just allows there to be that emphasis of evangelism on that Sunday night. There is always some series but how long it is or how many we do depends on how the rest of going through the Bible works out.

Ted

Yeah, my answer is that yes, we have, but it's more organic than it is structured. Jason is very structured in how he approaches it, which I would have expected! Ha!

Jason

I don't have the "organic" bone in my body! I've tried but I just can't do that!

(Laughter)

Rob

So when you say organic, do you mean it could be a one week thing, it could be a two week thing, or a whole month thing?

Ted

Yeah and that's just something that coming into Christmas I'll be able to identify. I'll give you some examples. If I'm in a long book and we're teaching exegetically through the scriptures - that's what we do, just as you guys do - and if I'm in a long book and I'm sensing we need a break, then I'll call an audible and we'll do a two or three or four week mini-series in the middle of that and then we'll come back to it. If it's a very long book, then I might do that two or three times as we go through that book. So sometimes that will be the case and I'll sense, "Ok, we can do this." Sometimes it's a timing issue and you finish one book and you've got four weeks until you want to start a new book in the new year so then you do it that way. Then, sometimes, it's just no. There are those sweet, providential times when you're going through a book and you're thinking, *This is the section that falls on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and it just...*

Rob

It just works.

Ted

Yeah, it just works.

Jason

I just did that last year and what I figured out was that my actual message on Christmas Eve is probably 20-25 minutes and so especially with kids in there, how deep can you go? And then trying to make it relatable to them and so I realized, "Wait, I got to start this earlier to where we can actually have time to talk about it." So I loved doing it last year and it's kind of the same this year. I'm just finishing up Exodus and so I'll have a time - and that's what I'm doing right now - where I'll try to set up a series that will lead us right into Christmas this year.

Rob

Yeah, I don't plan as much as Jason does but I am very much into the idea of trying to make sure we can do that. Like right now we're in 2 Peter and my goal is that our last message in 2 Peter will be the Sunday after Thanksgiving so we can then move into a four week Christmas series. I usually try to plan it that way because I hate - and I don't think I've ever done this - where we are in a book and then we take a break at Christmas and then we pick it up again in January. It's like I always want to be starting something new in January. It's like I feel it's a great onramp for new people who start coming. Like, "Hey, my New Year's resolution is that I'm going to go to church," and then I don't want them coming into the middle of Romans. I want them to come into the beginning of something new so I always try to plan it in that way so that whatever we're doing in the fall is going to end about that time. The other thing that I find is really kind of advantageous for me - especially I think I'm probably more into this now at my age at 58 than I was when I was in my thirties - is to share the pulpit. I love to do that but part of the problem that I wrestle with is that my Sunday morning messages are what goes on our radio program. I am the voice of our radio program and so when I'm going through 2 Peter I can't have Joe teach this section and then suddenly we have a gap in our radio program. So I like to use a Christmas series or any short series between any book that we're doing. It's a great opportunity to be able to let one of our other pastors have an opportunity to teach. I found, dating back to when Jason was around, that when, like for instance one of

our youth pastors would teach on a Sunday and they would do such an amazing job, then the parents would be like, "Wow, that guy is really good! I want my kids to go to the High School group." That type of thing. It would have a dual effect to it. So we're planning on doing a four week Christmas series and I'm going to do two of the weeks and two of the other guys are going to the other two weeks and we're talking right now about what that's going to look like and what we want to do and how that's going to build.

I just wonder, and you can answer the question too Jason, but is there anything particularly on your guy's minds right now because we're living in a different world, you know? And so, going into a service like Christmas and especially when we're reaching out to unbelievers and that type of thing, I'm always thinking about, *What's the tension? What's the problem? What's on people's minds? What are the questions that we need to answer?* And I'm really thinking about that right now as we're kind of framing what our Christmas series should look like. Any thoughts on that?

Jason

Yeah, I think that's really important and I'm not kidding when I say I don't have an organic bone in my body. I don't! I don't ever go on vacation in the middle of a book I'm teaching; I always want to finish it up and then leave. All that stuff is very important to me - because of some mental problem that I have in my heart!

(Laughter)

Jason

But at the same time, obviously, what we all want is to be led by the Holy Spirit in what we're doing. So the way I go through the Bible is that our Wednesday night is our "through the Bible study" and then our Sunday is what was taken from what we covered on Wednesday night. But, even with that said, my heart and prayer for every series, of course, and certainly for Christmas is, "What is the Lord wanting to say right now?" I'm currently teaching through the book of Philippians and so what we're doing is "The Mental Health of the Believer," because that's just where we are in the world. Anxiety is the number one mental illness in the United States and

the book of Philippians has so much to say about that. So that's how I'm setting up Sunday mornings, by thinking, *How do we think biblically?* I certainly want to do that when it comes to Christmas and Easter times as well, to speak to where the culture is at, and obviously from the timeless Word of God.

Brian

So, when we've been planning this, like what the sanctuary is going to look like and my theme and what we're going to do, it forces me each year to come up with that. This year I'm going to do "Always Winter, Never Christmas" from C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Of course there was this witch who put a curse on the land that was not taken away until Aslan came and then how this curse was lifted. Well, we're going to be tying into this. It's very scattered now with just the bones of it, no flesh on it yet, but we definitely live in a time where it feels like that winter and it's under this curse, but it'll just be a kind of a reminder that even though we're going through stuff with mandates and vaccines and so many people looking at losing their jobs right now - which is something we're all facing and lots of people are hurting with that - Jesus came and lifted the curse. I think that'll be the biggest thing that we're dealing with.

Ted

Yeah, I think it was Tim Keller who said, "We don't make the gospel relevant, it is relevant." And I think that's what informs all of our preaching anyway. As we're going through the text, as we're looking for the big idea, the truth of the text, the payday in that is, "How is this relevant to what people are going through?" So as we come into Christmas or any of the holidays, we're looking at, "What are the things that people are dealing with and how is the text I'm teaching relevant to that?"

Rob

Yeah. That's good stuff you guys. I think this is really insightful. I know I've learned some things today listening to you guys. Any final thoughts from anybody?

Ted

Well, I would encourage debriefing when you do a service. So, making a scheduled time to get your staff together as soon as possible after the event while it's fresh in your minds and talking about what worked and what didn't and where you were off and so on. That informs so much. We do that with every event. We do that for every Sunday, where the following day we're having a discussion and a debrief on different aspects of it and I think that's helpful.

Brian

We just put one of our pastors over events. Different people were taking different events and so at least we have a point person now. We've also done the same thing so as soon as that week's over and we get back together, we do that and I think that's very important. We have learned so much from that and that dictates next year like, "Let's not order so many of those next time."

Ted

Right.

Rob

Then next year we can find out from Jason how the live camels worked out!

(Laughter)

Jason

I was just going to say that next year I'll report back about how the live animals went! It's actually outside for a Christmas service as we're having a Christmas play, kind of like they do at Lamb's Players down in San Diego. Again, it's just another opportunity for people in our community to be a part of it so we just decided to do the whole living nativity outside for people to show up and see.

Brian

Just watch out for the fleas!

Jason

Yeah, no camels in the sanctuary! That's not going to happen!

Brian

That's great.

Rob

Well thanks, you guys, for being here today.

Jason

Thank you.

Rob

Thanks for chiming in! And for everybody listening, we hope your Christmas services are absolutely amazing this year and we will be picking up our Leadership Collective Podcast in January. We have some awesome guests that are going to be joining us and we are going to be tackling some great topics.

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.