

Brandon Cox: Hello and welcome to Advance by Purpose Driven, a podcast where we find healthy churches and interview their leaders to share their stories and their secrets with you. I'm your host, Brandon Cox. In every episode you'll learn from the successes and the setbacks, that ministry leaders, they develop intentional strategies for leading healthy disciple-making churches. Our goal is simply to equip and encourage you on your own path toward growing a healthy Purpose Driven Church.

Hey everybody, welcome back to PD Advance where we get to tell some stories of healthy churches, healthy movements, and hopefully just gain some insight, some wisdom to pass along to you. And I've got a guest today and I'm really excited about, I have Carl Nichols from Relevant Church in South Atlanta. Carl, thanks for being here.

Carl Nichols: Thanks Brandon for having us, man.

Brandon Cox: I want to start out, just kind of, I've known Carl for years so now and I've been really excited by his exciting stories, he's an exciting guy. So I want to just ask him to tell you a little bit of his story, how he got to where he is right now. So Carl fill us in.

Carl Nichols: Well, I'll keep it brief Brandon because I think pastors like to talk about themselves, but we've been blessed in the last nine years. We started Relevant in 2010 and have seen tremendous growth. There are five of us that moved there, three young adults from our student ministry moved and then we planted in 2010, October 10th, 2010. 10/10/10 we never forget it. So if you want to have a password around our church, it's 10, 10, 10, it's real simple and everybody looks back at that day and just reminiscent of God's hand at work, I think immediately from that point until now. And so we've seen tremendous growth, built a building and moved in, in 2016. And pretty incredible growth after that. We're building again now, 1100 seater auditorium. And I think the thing that excites me the most is we've seen over 2,500 people come to know Christ and over, almost 1500 now will take the next step of baptism. So we're excited about that.

Brandon Cox: That's awesome. Awesome. What would you say, that's obviously something big to brag on, just reaching people out of the harvest, lost people. What's the thing that excites you most about Relevant Church?

Carl Nichols: You know, if you'd asked me that same question 12 years ago, what I was looking forward to, obviously I want to see the thing grow and people come to know Christ. But I think over the last even three or four years, our heartbeat has become about those that are really broken in our community. And so, we're out here together at PD Conference and one of the things that we've launched in the last several years is Celebrate Recovery. Really helping hurting people find wholeness. And I think one of the things that we're finding though is a lot of people are taking that step and moving on that journey toward wholeness. But then there's a lot of people who maybe for whatever reason to think there's a

stigma attached to that. And so now we're really tackling that crisis of brokenness now because 90% of our people don't realize how broken they really are, including ourselves sometimes.

And so we are really now, as we build this auditorium and I've seen incredible growth and we really have nowhere to put anybody else now. Our staff and our team and really focused on getting the thing right to get people to wholeness and not worried about a building, not worried about all that. All that stuff's exciting, but are secondary to people taking the steps to reach wholeness. And so we're working hard right now on what the next phase or the next kind of, I guess that other group of people who won't maybe take that step of Celebrate Recovery, but what does it look like for wholeness for those people and in their marriages, and in their lives, and getting free from maybe pain, unforgiveness, those things from the past.

Brandon Cox: Love that. When you talk about easing into recovery ministry, ministering to the broken, what do you find is the biggest challenge, the scariest thing about moving that direction?

Carl Nichols: Man, I think the scariest thing is we all start to realize how broken we are. And I think as... We launched something a couple of years ago, it was really about reaching, for the LOVE, for the LOVE of. Lonely is the L, the O, the overwhelmed, the V, the vulnerable, the E the empty. And so we've tackled things like human trafficking, sex trafficking in our community, orphans, widows. It just really those that may be... you hear a lot about but nobody's really knows what to do. And so we've gone after a lot of that and reallocated our resources and our time and our energy. And the scary part is once you get into that, God starts giving you the opportunity. I think when you're faithful in little things, you're given much. And then how do you handle the much, because you're like, now there's hundreds of people with stories that you wouldn't believe that are coming. And we're going, "How in the world do we help these people get whole?"

And so it's overwhelming and that's the scariest part as we're looking at it going, "Okay." Just practically speaking, there's been some delays on our facility that we didn't anticipate. And I think that's God showing us, "I'm preparing you for those new people that are coming because you're not quite ready yet." And it's fascinating and it's exciting, but it's also humbling at the same time.

Brandon Cox: Yeah. I've got to go back to that acronym because I heard you say that when you were speaking in a conference and I love those four words. What are they? Remind us again, those four words, the word LOVE.

Carl Nichols: Yeah. Lonely, Overwhelmed, Vulnerable and Empty. And really everything we do is kind of centered around... I mean most people will experience one of those four things at some point in their life really. But really thinking about the single mom, the loneliness and the being overwhelmed. We think about those kids. There was this thing in Georgia a month or so ago and 231 or 41 kids are rescued that had been missing. Many they were put in human trafficking. Man,

those are the vulnerable kids, those orphans, those widows, those runaways. And then the empty is, I think at some point all of us kind of go through that season of life. And so rather than just doing kind of shotgun events or we try to be laser focused on how are we going to get the return on investment of our time, our energy, and our resources to actually help those that understand, "Hey, I need something in my life. Maybe I don't know what it is. Found Christ. But then as Jesus said, "Follow me and I'll make you fishers of men.""

They didn't really know what they were doing. They were just following this man. And now this journey unfolded and some stuck it out. And we know one didn't, one went back to fishing and then came back after he saw the resurrected Christ. And so, the hardest thing for us is understanding this is not a one-time event, but it's a journey we're willing to go on with these people. And we learned a lot about ourselves in the process.

Brandon Cox: Yeah. One of the things I've heard you say is that when you focus on those four kinds of people, you're talking about 95% of the people that live in the community your church serves. Yeah. And that's really cool thing because it's almost like those are the receptive people.

Carl Nichols: Sure.

Brandon Cox: So it gets you to focus in on people that are reachable. So it's very cool. What do you see as next for your church right now? So if you're moving into ministering to people that are broken with recovery, what's the next big thing on your radar?

Carl Nichols: Yeah, so I think, I'm getting ready to do a break out here shortly about growth barriers and that sort of thing. And I really believe for us, we have had to move people into staffing positions and reallocate maybe our staffing resources to certain areas that are better fits, I guess I should say. And so a couple of years ago, one of the things we talked about is we wanted to raise a generation that never knew a day without knowing Jesus. And so at that time we had one part-time kids person, now we have a department of four.

Brandon Cox: Yeah.

Carl Nichols: And so you start looking at it and saying, "Okay, we've got a kids director, a preteen director, a student pastor." Now we're looking at junior high and senior high. And then we got the young adults. And so this, this whole process that we dreamed three years ago, is now becoming a reality because we allocated the intentional resources and the focus toward it. Now we just came out of another 9-day goal setting and we're getting ready to go into a three year process again. And we're really focusing on that next step of discipleship. And so, that's really our laser focus. That's what I see on the horizon for our church. And I think one of the questions you asked me earlier before we started the podcast, like what

is it about the church that's happened? That people say or that you're most excited about?

For me, I think, and if you're around me long enough, I'm almost too authentic and too kind of vulnerable, so I get myself in trouble. And so we've tried to create a culture of just like, "It's okay not to be okay, but it's not okay to stay that way." But not just for people who come in, but also for our staff and our leadership. And so we've had to get real with ourselves. And one of our values as a team, our leadership team and our staff is we embrace brave communication. And because we're going to, not only for conflict issues, but like we want to hold you accountable in your life and say like, "Hey, what's going on? Something's not right. How do we get this right?" And so many of our interns and our staff have taken the journey of celebrate recovery or counseling because we realize we don't have to be whole to make a difference, but we as Christ followers, we should always be journeying toward that wholeness.

Brandon Cox: Yeah.

Carl Nichols: And so it's overwhelming, but it's all kind of tied together. And I think part of the reason we're seeing so many people come is the vulnerability factor. It's not me, it's our staff and our team and that's what people say when they show me, I mean this so real and authentic and I'm accepted for who I am and so that's what I see happening in our church and I really believe, if I'm honest, I think that's the church of the future. It's easy to see the highlight reels. I mean, and look, we have our highlight reels we put out, I get it, everybody does, but I mean what's going to be the church that sustains all this coming in our country, in our culture, is the fact that we are helping hurting people find wholeness in Christ and reaching their full potential.

Brandon Cox: Yeah, I love that. Let me talk for a second to the pastor out there, maybe who's been in ministry a while, leading a church and feels a little dissatisfied with where they are spiritually. Maybe here is this thing goes, "I wish that were us. I wish we could be more real. I wish we could go a little deeper together." How do you encourage a pastor in a church that, that's not been the culture? How could they dive in and instigate it?

Carl Nichols: Well, I almost didn't go here, but you just said the word culture. And so I think culture begins at the top. And so I'll give you a couple of thoughts that I'll probably repeat several times a day while we're in different meetings. But I believe culture becomes the worst behavior the leader is willing to tolerate.

Brandon Cox: Oh wow.

Carl Nichols: And so if there's a culture that you're not happy with, if there's a culture that you're not excited about, chances are something that you as the leader have tolerated. And so if there's a frustration there, we've got to figure out where that came from, where that started from. And so authenticity starts at the top.

And so if you want to create a culture of authenticity, you got to peel back the mask, and you've got to be real and you got to be vulnerable. And it doesn't necessarily start on the stage on a Sunday. It starts with the people that are closest to you. They can look you in the eye and say, "I can tell something's different." and you're willing to let them in. And so, we're talking about vision and all those things in church planting this week and some of the things that we've discussed. But I believe a good vision dies in a bad culture. But an average vision can thrive in a great culture.

And so in my home, if I tell my kids, I tell this example to our staff all the time, if I want them to grow up and I say to my oldest boy, "I want you to go off to med school, and want you at this school and I want you to be this kind of doctor, and this is my dream and my vision for your life." But yet at home, the culture is not ripe and it's... I mean, he might move out when he's 18 and say, "I don't want anything to do with mom and dad." But if I just say, "Look, I want you to love Jesus and find God's plan for your life and I'm going to be proud of you." But I cultivate a culture in our home for him to thrive, that can take off.

Brandon Cox: Yeah.

Carl Nichols: And so that's the same thing in our church, and we have to cultivate that and it takes time and it takes vulnerability and authenticity sometimes that makes the leader uncomfortable.

Brandon Cox: Yeah. And it's probably going to make a lot of people uncomfortable, be hard and difficult, just like it was for Jesus.

Carl Nichols: Yeah.

Brandon Cox: You know? Yeah. When it comes to where pastors are at today and you think about the larger culture, think about where we're at, not just in America, but just in modern times. What do you think are the big challenges pastors need to be thinking about? "How do I overcome this in my church?"

Carl Nichols: Yeah. I think if we were to try to figure out how many... And we're doing some trends now to look at attendance of our church. And if we look at the average attendance weekly versus the average attendance monthly, I mean it's more than two times the weekly attendance is the monthly people that come through our doors. And so the lack of consistency in church attendance is very, very difficult. And additionally, when you do get them, they're now connected into a small group, which we're seeing... You want 100% of people connected to a small group, the problem is 100% of what number? The average attendance or the people who come through... If you do the average sentence, we're at 70%, 80% but if you do the people who come every once a month, we're half or less.

And so that's the big challenge of like, you don't want these false numbers giving you a sense that you're accomplishing something. The other thing about

the discipleship thing, and I've said this to our young adults and our interns because we have about 10 interns every year who are in a 10 month program. As I say, "There's two things that your generation struggling with and that is leadership and theology." And so when a strong leader rises up with a bad theology, that generation follows.

Brandon Cox: Yeah.

Carl Nichols: And so I'll say we've got a leadership deficit and we've got a theology deficit. And that's not just in that generation. The theology deficit, it comes from... I'm from the South, I live in the South and there's some bad theology in the South. And so not just doing small groups and we do a sermon based and it's all based on the message and the teachings. But how do we help people understand what happened in Genesis? What happened when we sin and separate ourselves from God? And the redemptive story and now what that requires of those who really want to follow him? That is a huge task for us. And I think if we're going to see the church grow and thrive, it's going to be more than just who shows up on Sundays. It's going to be what are we doing to disciple and help people understand who they are in Christ and why that's important.

Brandon Cox: Yeah, I love that. So if I were to show up at your church this coming Sunday, and say, "I'm a guest, I'm friendly with the idea of Jesus. I want to take a next step." How do you walk people through next steps at your church?

Carl Nichols: Wow. That's always changing. I think one of the things is we craft language that helps and we just say, "Look, this is your first, second or third time. We know that you're kind of checking things out. We hope you'll just keep coming and give it a shot." And give people the opportunity to belong before they believe. I think that's a misinterpreted statement. Belonging before you believe doesn't mean you're given the keys to the car to drive. And so, but you can be a part of things, you can connect with things. That doesn't mean you're going to teach our kids, but there's a way you can belong before you believe. And so I think our atmosphere and our culture is so welcoming and so I don't know, genuine and real from the parking lot all the way in. Now there's some times we see when we get surveys back, that we take of a guest that we missed it but letting people know it's a safe place for you to bring your family.

I think one of the greatest things that we have going for us, is we have a kids ministry where kids begged to come back when mom and dad may not know if they want to. And the kids are coming out and they scream, "Can we please come back?" I just had a parent tell me Sunday, every single morning the daughter wakes them up and says, "It's church Sunday. And we got to get up. We got to go." And so that's one of the greatest things we can do is provide for their kids and then they'll stick it out a lot of times. And so I don't know about the 50 year old without kids. That's a little harder one. I can't say we've mastered that one, but letting them belong before they believe and then we have obviously our steps, first step, next step, leader step, which first step is simply an introduction.

If you're just new checking things out, you want to make friends, or you want to just kind of get to know some people. Here's a great way to do it. It's a one off fun event we do for an hour, we feed you and it's just a little bit about who Jesus is, prayer and the Bible and why we believe what we believe, but it's a fun hour long thing. And hopefully from there we can kind of help navigate them through that process. But there are probably some pieces missing that we're looking into now.

Brandon Cox: Yeah, that's cool. You mentioned kids. Do you guys do a lot of events for families and kids?

Carl Nichols: No, not really. In fact, it's interesting because... I mean, I hope I don't offend anybody back home around this when I say this, but everybody says, "Do you do a VBS?" And I said, "Yeah, we do one every Sunday." We don't do a VBS during the summer. Everybody else does it. We send our kids to theirs and because I'm not interested in just being a childcare center where people just go to a VBS is eight weeks in the summer. So we allocate our time, energy and resources into making Sunday special and to helping. The biggest thing that I think we have done well at is a transition, that never know a day without knowing Jesus. We do small groups and large groups, but from preschool to kindergarten. And then that third and fourth grade window, we found a few years ago that we were losing our fourth and fifth graders because they're more like teenagers now, they got cell phones, unfortunately at that age.

And we were seeing we'd have 300- 400 kids and we'd have 12 fourth and fifth graders and we're like, "Something's wrong." So we just launched a preteen ministry a little over a year and a half ago, and now we have 75 to 100 preteen every Sunday.

Brandon Cox: That's awesome.

Carl Nichols: Fourth and fifth graders, and then helping them transition to fourth grade, helping the fifth graders transition to sixth grade. That's part of what we do is just being intentional about the life stages. Event wise, we did a lot of shotgun events, dropping eggs out of helicopters, sky diving Easter bunnies, all that stuff to kind of get on the map and let people know we were there. But we do some intentional things when kids are on our campus. So we do some things like surprise and delight. I mean just this past Sunday we gave 400 balloons to kids randomly. They didn't know they were getting them. We're doing a series called Sunday in the South and like, we had free watermelon for everybody.

And so the balloons were watermelon balloons and the kids loved it. They just thought it was cool. I didn't even know we're doing it. But we're really intentional about the next steps with kids. We started something probably three years ago. We give a lunch box that has our kids' logo on the front of it, and it's about a \$7 overall gift when it's said and done. And then we have little values in our kids ministry, like we put the cookies on the bottom shelf is one of them, and that is that we teach on your level. That's really what it means. So there's a

card in there and there's a gift that represents each one of those values. And so when the kid opens it up, we tell the parent, there's something there for you. The kid gets all these gifts, the parent knows what each gift represents, and the parents goes, "Now, I can be part of this."

Brandon Cox: Yeah.

Carl Nichols: So the intentionality that those little things is what really, I think keeps people coming back.

Brandon Cox: Yeah, it's awesome. I love that partnership between church and parents.

Carl Nichols: Yeah.

Brandon Cox: Not replacing them, but giving them a tool.

Carl Nichols: Yeah.

Brandon Cox: It's really cool.

Carl Nichols: No doubt.

Brandon Cox: Yeah. Well, when you think about pastors who are out there today, we know that on the whole statistically, tons of pastors feel like giving up.

Carl Nichols: Yeah.

Brandon Cox: They maybe dream of having a situation that when you plant something it thrives, but maybe they're facing just difficulty. How do you encourage them? What do you say to a pastor maybe who's going through a hard time right now?

Carl Nichols: I think I would say, first of all, you may feel alone and you may be alone in your situation at this point, but you're not alone in the fact that you're the only one that's ever felt that way. Nearly every close friend I have, I look at and go, "I remember that season when you were there. I remember that season when my family went through a difficult time." I was like, "Man, this is hard." I think going back to two words that I shared with the group yesterday was, "You got to know if you're driven or if you're called." Because there's a difference. There's time when I'm not driven to get out of bed, but my calling compels me. And so going back to that calling, going back and if you're struggling with that, maybe go back and write down the day you were called. Remember that moment. Reflect on that moment. Don't live in the feelings of the moment because if you live on the mountaintops, you got to live in the valleys too. So I think just coming back to that calling and if you're discouraged, get help.

I mean literally sometimes we just need to sit down, face to face with a counselor and pour out our guts. I think every pastor, this is just my opinion,



every pastor at some point probably needs a counselor. And not one that can tell them they're doing everything right, but one they can just throw it out all on the table and the counselor go, "Well, you know, here's the good, the bad and the ugly," and help them walk through the process of healing. So I wish there was a cookie cutter approach, but I think it starts with what we talked about earlier. Being authentic and being vulnerable with somebody and letting them walk you through it.

Brandon Cox: And I love that. I love that. And I agree completely with you. I think out of our Purpose Driven culture and I know Pastor Rick Warren has talked about counseling saved his marriage and he pushes the staff, "Go get it because it's healthy and it's good." And we just got to kind drop the masks.

Carl Nichols: Yeah. And I think if I could say something to pastors of larger churches that I have learned... Look, there's a lot larger churches than us but we've seen a lot of growth in the last, especially the last three or four years. I've struggled with knowing when to say to my staff, "Hey, I see something, we're going to send you to counseling." I would say I'm learning now to just step into that void and say, "God called you to that. Don't look back and let that marriage struggle. Don't look back and let that wife go through that. Don't look back and say, 'I wish I would've done that at that season.'" And so that's something as a fairly young pastor, I've had to learn to navigate speaking to older staff or everything in between and saying, "No, no, no, we need this fixed. You need to know that I see this." And not being afraid to dive into that because if you don't, you'll look back and wish you would have one day.

Brandon Cox: It's so good. Well man, if people listening want to stalk you, learn from you, learn something from you, what's the best place they can find out more about you?

Carl Nichols: Man, here's the thing. I am like the worst at social media in the world and I think, here's the reason why. I think this is going to sound superficial, but go with me for a second. I have a hard time putting a highlight reel out there and I really don't want to put all my crap out there. You know what I mean?

Brandon Cox: Yeah.

Carl Nichols: And so it's hard to like know... And so and funny, we were getting ready and I was like, "Hey, you've not told your wife to take a picture. I'll be doing this podcast because it's got to go on our church planting site." I hate that kind of stuff. I absolutely hate it. And so man, you can check it out on Twitter, but don't get excited or Instagram or Facebook at Carl Nichols. Most of them are there, but you don't get excited about getting things in your thread every day. And so if you want to know about what we're doing with church planting, [Create, A Church Planting Network, create@churchplanning.com](#) that's really what we've been talking about a lot this week. And then of course, Relevant Church. You go to [myrelevant.cc](#) and check it out there.

Brandon Cox: Awesome. Love it. Man, Carl, thanks so much for being on the podcast today.

Carl Nichols: Yeah, thanks for having me.

Brandon Cox: All right, we'll catch you guys next time. That's it for today. We hope you felt both encouraged and enlightened by today's episode. We want to thank you in advance for all you're going to do to lead a healthy, growing purpose driven church. Till next time.