The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series
“From Financial Struggles to Growth and a Healthy Culture “
June 18, 2018
Vann Ellison

Female: Today’s podcast is brought to you by BCWI’s 360 Leadership Assessment.

Male: Welcome to the Flourishing Culture Podcast, where you’ll learn how to build a flourishing workplace culture that drives the ministry impact of your organization, your church, or your company, brought to you by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. Now here’s your host, BCWI president, Al Lopus.

Al Lopus: Hello, and thanks for joining us again on the Flourishing Culture Podcast. Would you care to guess how good it feels to be on the staff of a rescue mission whose culture is in the top 10 percent of all rescue missions in the United States? Would you like your culture to experience the same kind of trust, transparency, and unity? Today we have the pleasure of visiting with Vann Ellison, the president and CEO of St. Matthew’s House in Naples, Florida. Hi, Vann, and welcome to our podcast today.

Vann Ellison: It’s great to be with you. I really appreciate the call and the chance to share a little bit about who we are and what’s going on here.

Al: Thanks, Vann, and we’re looking forward to hearing what you have to share with us as well. To start off, you have a great story about your career path. I’m sure you didn’t think of it that way when it started, but tell us about the way your career has worked out and what has led you to your current role.

Vann: Well, I appreciate that. You’re right. A lot of times in the middle of something it doesn’t feel really good, but in the end you see where God had his hand on it. I started off planning on being a lawyer, going into politics, trying to change the world, and I ended up just being a mischievous college student who wasn’t doing really well and lost my way. I came back home after a kind of crisis in my own life, and that’s where God intervened and really changed my world.
I surrendered my life to Christ at 22, and very quickly I felt a call to working with alcoholics and addicts and people on the streets. I didn’t know what to do. I was a kid who wasn’t going to law school. Instead, now I was thinking about, “What do I do?” As I started praying about things, I felt God leading me to the psychiatric hospital business. I went in and applied for a job. I didn’t think I would get hired. I was just going to share what God had done in my own life, in my own crisis to bring me to renewal. I thought, “Well, if I’m being led here, I ought to at least be bold and tell them who I really am.”

I found that, to my surprise, they double-crossed me and hired me to work on a psychiatric unit. As I started working with adolescents in an adolescent intensive care psychiatric facility and dealing with people in the midst of brokenness, I really loved being able to be there, share the love of Christ, and see what happened in their lives. I felt a call into ministry. I went back to school to study to be a pastor, a missionary, and yet worked my way up the chain of command in the hospital business. I eventually became a hospital administrator, and then my passion for ministry...

I had two things in my own life that are relevant to the Christian workplace. One is that churches typically weren’t well-run businesses. There was a lot of chaos, and a lot of ministries were just a mess, and yet the hospital business where I was was not about the heart for the people; it was really about business. So I found that oftentimes business seemed to have no soul and no purpose. When you talk about life-giving work, I loved the people I served, but the hospital business was so empty.

So I prayed about that, and God opened up a door for me to go work as a jail chaplain. Since I love that population, had worked with them for many years, I was hired by our local sheriff’s office to be the chaplain in our local jails. In that role, I found that I didn’t like government too much either. You couldn’t be responsive because government tied our hands and we couldn’t make a lot of decisions, yet as Christ’s ambassador in the jails I was able to live my faith in a real way.

The whole way through, I took notes. “If I was ever to run a ministry, I want to run it like the best business in the country. I want it to be efficient and smart. I want it to be excellent, but I want to manifest the heart of God’s love for the people I serve. I want to do it with a heart of a real ministry but with the excellence of the best business and with determination to always be there, like a government organization is going to always be there as an anchor for the community.”

In 2004, my predecessor at St. Matthew’s House was terminally ill, and I was asked to apply for that position, to run St. Matthew’s House. When I was asked, I immediately looked back on my career and the path God had brought me on, and I knew God’s curriculum was better than any academic curriculum, better than any course I could have taken. God had prepared me for 20 years to be in this position so that I had enough business to know how to start mischief and get things done with a good business plan, but I had seen the things I didn’t like and had taken note of the things I loved, and I wanted to bring a passion for business.
At St. Matthew’s House, we love Christ, we love the broken, the hurting who come to us, but more than that, we also believe in a radical free market kind of idea, that we can make a difference in the world. Using free markets, using business excellence to recruit good quality people to help us make a difference. We don’t have government funding. We have social enterprises, businesses we’ve created that advance our mission, and it’s really just part of a vision God gave me.

There’s a passage in Scripture I think your listeners are probably familiar with. It says, “If any of you lack wisdom, ask of the Lord, and he’ll give it to you abundantly.” My life shows that I don’t have wisdom, so God promises he’ll give it to me abundantly. I’ve had to keep asking, and he has blessed us with a great ministry to make a difference in our community.

Al: That’s a great story. I appreciate that, Vann. I love that business and ministry discussion and combination. Wow. I love your brand promise at St. Matthew’s House as well. It leads right into the discussion we’ve just had. Touching hearts and transforming lives. What is this promise about, Vann? How did you come up with that?

Vann: If we’re honest, the idea is that a lot of people come to a soup kitchen just wanting a plate of food. They come to a homeless shelter just needing rest from the weather, but we don’t want to just touch that need; we want to transform their life. So the idea was that it’s more than just the pain we’re trying to relieve. We believe the pain a person is in… When they call an organization like St. Matthew’s House, they’re calling because there’s a real need in their life.

They may identify the hunger, the homelessness, the addiction, the brokenness, but the reality is in most cases they need a transformed life. They need a brighter future. They need a relationship with God. The last thing I think about that is that people come to us believing there is no hope for them. Usually, people come to a homeless shelter with no place else to go. If you had family or friends, you had money in your bank account or on your credit card or in a 401(k), you wouldn’t come to a shelter.

We become that family of last resort. When they encounter that God’s people love them, there is the promise and the hope of a transformed life. I think about the image of a lady following behind Jesus with an issue of blood that had crippled her, had limited her, had made her weak for years. She thought, “If I could just touch the hem of his garment, he might heal me.”

Well, she got more than a healing. She got to be a lady of faith and inspiration who has motivated people to reach out and touch Jesus for 2,000 years. She was transformed by an encounter with the Savior, and that’s our promise. We don’t want to just touch a heart; we want to see that life transformed.

Al: Transformation of lives. That is what it’s all about. You got into your current role and responsibilities. Tell us a little bit about some of the challenges you saw facing St. Matthew’s House.
What things in your culture particularly needed attention? What wasn’t working when you stepped into this role 14 years ago?

**Vann:** Well, one of the things is we really weren’t a Christian ministry. We were founded out of the Ministerial Association, but we had drifted a long way from God’s heart for the broken. We’d become a very secular organization. I began praying for change, that God would begin to bring a revival among our staff, among our volunteers, and that we could impact our whole culture with that.

Economically we were in trouble as well. It was hard to make payroll. About 10 percent of our budget at that time (we were a $1.5 million-a-year organization) was government funding, and 10 percent of it was generated through our thrift store. So I knew we were economically in trouble, and my fear was, my assessment was that if we had an economic downturn we might be in even worse shape when we were needed the most. We didn’t have the stability.

The last thing is we really weren’t doing things with excellence. The food we were serving was just good enough. The services we were providing in the shelter, the care… People were treated almost like, “What are you here for?” So we started looking at what we could do to radically change our culture. Prayer, financial independence, and excellence. I looked at our problems, and those pointed to the solutions. We served really mediocre or bad food. Well, then why couldn’t we start a catering business?

We had a commercial kitchen. We had a great capacity to serve better food, and we had donated food. So let’s get a professional chef to begin to train people how to work in the food service business. Let’s begin to generate enough revenue from catering to cover our feeding ministry. So we launched another business, and that has now become the biggest and highest rated catering service in Collier County, in our area, which is kind of the billionaire coast of southwest Florida.

We looked at what we were doing with our thrift stores, and we thought, “We can do this better.” The need among donors was that they needed better, prompter service, so we said, “If we’re going to do a store, let’s treat the donors, the people who call and say, ‘I want to give you a bedroom set...’ Let’s get there first with a great attitude. Let’s share the good news of what we’re about.” So we started focusing on getting there fast and first and with a great attitude.

When we went into homes and found that there was a widow who had lost a husband, instead of just taking the donation, we said, “Can we pray with you? Can we be a blessing to you?” As we started doing that, we saw that our thrift store grew from about 10 percent of our budget to now covering about 70 percent of our budget, and our budget now is $15 million.

So in the 14 years, our budget size has increased 10 times. Our capacity to serve, the reputation we have in the community for excellence… All has gone up because we addressed the issues about having a good culture, a godly culture, and one that’s based with measurable success factors and
communicating all throughout the organization, “What’s the purpose of what we’re here about?” We want to treat people right.

**AI:** Tell us a little bit about the transformation of your culture to such a Christ-centered one. For instance, after you completed the Best Christian Workplaces Employee Engagement Survey, we discovered the leaders at St. Matthew’s House were demonstrating the compassion and humility of Christ while exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit, and all of that created really high levels of trust. What were some of the key steps you took along the way? You’ve already mentioned prayer, financial independence, and excellence, but what were some of the key steps you took that really moved the culture toward a Christ-centered culture?

**Vann:** Well, a couple of things we started doing. In all areas of the organization, we started doing voluntary Bible study. We started the day in the thrift store… Instead of just opening it up and selling used stuff to people, we started with an employee-led prayer time, an employee-led Bible study. We started asking about those things. We start all business meetings, whether it’s our board meetings or committee meetings, with prayer, and we start with a testimony. We ask somebody to share, “What has God done in your life through St. Matthew’s House?”

That may be a resident in one of our programs, our drug and alcohol program, our homeless shelter. It might be a staff member. Some of the most meaningful meetings we’ve had are when a staff member says, “Well, I came here [however many years ago], and this is what has happened in my life.” By sharing a testimony, it changes the whole nature of the way we do business. The Word of God and our testimony are powerful change agents.

You’re no longer in a meeting quarreling about facts and figures. Those things may happen. You may have a vigorous discussion, but it’s preceded by the cultural mandate. “This is about glorifying God in what we do.” Now we have a new board chair, and her focus is “Let’s have every board member share a testimony at the start of a meeting,” so every meeting starts with a board member saying, “What has God done in your life through St. Matthew’s House since you joined us?” That whole idea that we are a Christ-centered organization…

I did a job interview with somebody recently, and I asked a couple of questions, and she said, “You really do lead with your faith here.” I said, “Yeah, we do.” She said, “When it said ‘Christian’ I thought that meant good, but you really mean Christian, don’t you?” I said, “Yes, we do. Are you comfortable working in that environment?” It was great to have her say, “I’m not sure. I have to think about that.” Praise God. In the interview process she’s saying, “Am I willing to live by this standard? Am I willing to work in a standard where this is really about the glory of God, not just about career?”

We’ve had all kinds of crises while we’ve been here. I remember one time we had a budget situation where we knew we had a budget shortfall, and we knew we were going to have about a $150,000
budget shortfall a month. The staff was like, “Well, what do we do? Should we start making plans for layoffs?” I said, “Well, we need to pray and ask God to do something.” At the end of that short prayer time, I left going, “Well, God, I really don’t know what to do, and I don’t know who to lay off and how to trim the fat. I don’t think there’s enough to trim.”

The phone rang, and it was a donor who said, “Hey, I want to talk with you. Can you stop by my house? I lent some money to somebody in business, and there’s a mortgage they’re paying me each month, and I thought, ‘You know, I ought to give this to St. Matthew’s House. I don’t need that money this month.’” So I met with him, and he said, “Yeah, I’d like to give this to you. What are your needs?” I told him.

I said, “Well, we just had a prayer meeting because we know we’re going to be about $150,000 a month short.” He said, “Well, here’s my mortgage check. It’s for $156,000.” So he pledged to give us that mortgage payment for the next couple of years. During that tough economic time, God was the source through this donor and through this business investment he had made years ago. God met our needs. So we celebrate that. We remember that.

I was doing Bible study with the women in our drug and alcohol program today, and I was recounting how God had provided the facility in which they live. We keep recognizing that he’s the source of our capacity, our strength, our imagination, and even the buildings in which we sit.

Al: So voluntary Bible study programs and prayer, prayer and testimonies at all meetings. I’d say board chairs and CEOs who are listening... The idea of having a testimony at the beginning of each meeting is a great way to start all meetings to keep in mind what you’re all about, and then recognizing God is the source. Those are three great steps you’ve taken.

Vann: We have core values that govern a lot of what we do. They’re helpful, healing, God-honoring, and excellence. Those are our four core values. So we’ll talk about, “Is what we’re doing really God-honoring today?” That helps us set the culture with established, simple core values that everybody can remember and recognize.

Al: Give us those one more time, Vann.

Vann: Helpful, healing, God-honoring, and excellence.

Al: Those are four great values. I’m curious how you came upon those, if you could just reflect on that for a minute.

Vann: We sat down with our team, and I said two things. I talked a little bit about what core values were, and then I asked the team, “What do you think are the words that best describe us?” I used the example of the Marine Corps. Their core values are courage, commitment, and honor. If you don’t have
commitment to the Corps, if you don’t have honor, if you don’t have courage in the face of fire, you’re not really a Marine. So I said, “What do we want our people to look like? What’s our DNA?”

The first thing that came up was that we were God-honoring. We help a lot of people. We provide food and opportunities and shelter and recovery. Before long, the team came up with those. I probably would have come up with something different had it been me. I would have tried to be more artistic or more creative in some way, but we came up with about 50 different suggestions, and then we started grouping them together and saying…

It was the team that said, “This is who we identify ourselves as.” We had a Christian culture that said, “These are our core values,” so now when we do annual reviews, when we look at the way we discipline people, we go back to our core values. If there’s gossip, we say, “Is that conversation helpful? And if it isn’t, why are you having it?” We’ll fire people for not abiding by our core values.

**Al:** That’s fantastic. Helpful, healing, God-honoring, and excellence. Our employee engagement survey measures the true health of your culture by pinpointing the accurate measure of eight factors every Christian culture needs to flourish. We have fantastic teams, life-giving work, outstanding talent, uplifting growth, rewarding compensation, inspirational leadership, sustainable strategy, and healthy communication, these eight factors.

Earlier this year, you took the survey. You were involved in the survey, and it revealed that at St. Matthew’s House, all eight of these areas are really strong. Highly weighted factors, life-giving work, inspirational leadership, and sustainable strategy… Each one of these really stood out. As you reflected on these survey results, what are some of the most successful practices you’ve created to grow these cultural strengths?

**Vann:** Well, a couple of things I go back to is we really believe in ownership. If there’s a problem, I have to own it, and if there’s a solution… People in our organization don’t just bring in complaints and problems. When we say, “Hey, we’re losing some truck drivers in our thrift store because they’re leaving for more money…” Okay, well, what do we need to do about that? I don’t want just to recognize there’s an issue. Let’s come up with the solution.

So we’re very solution oriented, and we’ve determined we’re going to lead the industry. Not just the homeless or social service sector; we want it to be the best business in our community. If the state of Florida were to pick the best business in the state of Florida, we want to be a candidate, and we want to do that because we really pursue excellence in all of these areas. Candidly, Al, I was a little bit nervous about doing the survey. I’m really critical in the way I look at things, and I recognize problems.

When I first came and I realized how lousy the food was, I thought, “We can do something about this,” so we did. I thought, “Well, what if there’s stuff I haven’t seen yet? And what if the survey shows what
a bad manager I really am?” So there was a little bit of anxiety about having you guys come in and tell me if we are doing a good job or not. When I found out you were going to meet with me personally to go over the results, I was like, “Uh-oh. This is bad news,” but we found out our work over the years has really been focused on “How do we care for our people? How do we build the right culture?”

I really do believe healthy culture trumps almost any other thing. With a strong team that has committed people who are bought in, we can face any adversity and accomplish the things in front of us with that healthy culture. We do a lot to deal with that. We don’t want to leave for the day with an unanswered call, with an unanswered request for help. We want to really look at people. Even if we can’t give them the answer, we’ve at least acknowledged that we’re here for them, and we want to treat our people right.

The most uncomfortable thing in our culture for me is when an employee says, “Hey, boss, come here. Let me show you this.” It’s like, “You know, I’m really not the boss. I just get the privilege of working here alongside of you. I may have more responsibility, but this is about us. We are a team.” There really is that culture of belief. Jesus said if you want to be a leader you’re called to be a servant of all. My job is to be a servant. That’s something I hope reflects all the way through from every position in every part of the organization.

Al: I trust you’re enjoying our podcast today. We’ll be right back after an important word for leaders.

Female: Discover your key strengths as a leader and identify your greatest development opportunities. It’s yours with the 360 Leadership Assessment by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. Gain a true, accurate measure of your own leadership from a biblical worldview. Join the more than 1,000 leaders and their colleagues now putting their 360 insights and lessons to work every day.

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Al: Now back to today’s special guest.

We had to look pretty hard, Vann, but the survey did show there was some room for improvement in a couple of specific areas. Knowing where you were strong certainly was a great thing, but what are a couple of things that came out of that discussion, maybe some action steps you took on areas you found you could improve a little bit?

Vann: Well, one of the things... We realized our people really loved our mission, they believed in our organization, but oftentimes they didn’t feel as connected with me, with the vision, with what we’re
doing. So one of the first things we started doing were some internal podcasts. We’ve grown to be bigger. When I started we had 37 employees. Now we have 230 employees, so we’re a lot bigger, and it’s hard to remember their names. When we have an employee meeting, it’s hard to get everybody together, so that practice had lapsed.

So the leadership team and myself are being conscious and purposeful about getting out among the employees. Fortunately, I have ADD, so it’s easy for me to get distracted and decide, “Hey, I need to get up and go see what’s going on.” I get to wander around a bit and bump into things and talk to people. It’s just reminding me that instead of sitting in my office and working on something, I need to go check on my people. I need to talk to them.

We just finished up a little while ago today doing a broadcast to our employees so that everybody can get an email with a message, get to see my face and hear the heart about what we’re doing and why we’re doing it, and tell them about the good news, how we’re concluding our fiscal year, what we’re going to be doing as we’re moving forward the next few months. So we’re trying to consciously and purposefully engage people and meet with those teams. That’s one of the biggest things.

Every area where there was need for improvement pointed directly at me, Al. I wish it could point at somebody else, but we believe in extreme ownership, the idea that if there’s a problem I need to be the guy who’s addressing it. In every one of those areas, I need to roll up my sleeves and say, “What can I do to be a better, more effective leader to minister to the team that’s here?” We’re blessed that we have a team that responds well to encouraging words and being informed.

**Al:** That’s a fantastic story. I love the idea of internal podcasts. How about that? A way of communicating good news stories. Your know, your example of managing by walking around. It’s great that people see you. You had a couple of locations, as I recall, you hadn’t been to as frequently as you had hoped to.

**Vann:** We started with a couple of locations when I started. Now we have 12 across three counties. So it was making a purposeful effort to get out there, to be with the people. That’s what I really love. What’s funny is without your survey… You forget sometimes what you love most. I love the people I work with, the people we’re called to serve, and yet I got busy just doing stuff in my office. So it was a reminder it was time to put a little miles on my car and go visit some folks and encourage them.

Tonight is date night for my wife and me, and after date night tonight we’re going to go and check in with the men in our drug and alcohol program, and before they have lights out and go to bed we’re going to have prayer time with those guys. Getting back to what I’m passionate about has made me… I don’t know how the organization is going to respond to our changes, but I’m happier, I’m more engaged, and I feel better about what I’m doing today because I was encouraged by Best Christian Workplaces Institute to roll up my sleeves and get back to doing what God had called me to.
Al: Well, it has been a pleasure just to listen to your story. If you’re happier, we’re happier, Vann. I’ll say that. Hey, I’ll bet you have a story you’d like to tell about how building a healthy culture has caused your people to flourish and be the best they can be, to really be excellent.

Vann: There are a lot of things that are here. One of the things I think about… About half of our employees came to us as homeless people, drug addicted or coming in off the streets, and our investment over the years has been that we want to build a culture that’s redemptive and that points people to a brighter future. We create opportunities for people to come into the organization, and throughout the organization…

Sitting here with me today is a young man who came to us. His first encounters with St. Matthew’s House were coming at 5:00 a.m. for a cup of coffee at our soup kitchen. He found hope in talking with people and came in, got sober through our program, has just become a key member of our team. Today we couldn’t imagine the St. Matthew’s House without him here, without him contributing and being part of it, and he came to us a desperate guy needing a cup of coffee. That’s what he wanted; instead he got a family that loves him desperately. What a joy.

Al: Yeah, there’s nothing better than a family that loves you desperately. What a transformation experience that is. My first exposure to St. Matthew’s House was to donate some of my mother’s clothes (she lives in Naples) at one of your thrift stores. I’ll have to say it was a great experience, and your staff was all very professional and helpful. In fact, we dropped off some various things, and then on the way out my mother stopped at your jewelry store and bought some jewelry. So you got her at both ends.

Vann: That’s the goal.

Al: It’s working, isn’t it? At the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, we believe a healthy culture is a true and worthy end in itself. We also believe a healthy to flourishing culture leads to organizational growth and even greater ministry impact. How has growing your culture… You’ve already mentioned several of these things, but how has growing your culture influenced your organizational impact and outcome there in the Naples, Southwest Florida area?

Vann: Budget-wise, we’re 10 times larger than we were. Our fixed assets grew from… When I came we were about $7 million in assets. Today we’re more than $30 million in assets. We’ve seen that God has grown our organization. One of the things that’s most amazing is we’re in a prominent position in the community. It’s fascinating to me. The Barna Group did a study about all of America, looking at the major marketplaces, and they were looking at it from the post-Christian kind of perspective.

What cultures, what communities were the least Christian in the United States? Nobody wants to be on that list, the most post-Christian cities in America. Most of them are in the Northeast. One of the top 10
happens to be where you live, in Seattle. The highest rated as most post-Christian culture in the Southeastern United States is Naples/Fort Myers, Florida. What we found is that people weren’t coming here wanting to retire and wanting to find God; they were coming here wanting to kick back and have a drink and think about what they’ve done with their lives.

When we started building a stronger, better culture, we started impacting everything. Our donor base has grown, but our influence… I’m being asked to speak at groups that oftentimes one of the first things you check out… Their website will say, “We’re a non-sectarian, non-religious group,” and they come and ask me to come and speak. “Well, what changed you?” and I can tell them, “A gospel message.” They don’t mind, because they see that we’re loving the least of these.

When Jesus said, “The poor you’ll have with you always…” I think one of the reasons we can’t solve the poverty issue is because the world takes note when God’s people love the poor. The world takes note when the church acts like we’re supposed to. We’re now changing our whole culture. Our goal is not to build a thriving culture at St. Matthew’s House but to change our region of the world. We believe God has called us to change the culture of Collier County, Lee County, and our surrounding area so that this becomes one of the most godly communities in America.

**AI:** That’s a great testimony. The only thing we have to offer is what we are ourselves, and just by having, first of all, transformed hearts amongst your leaders, a transformed staff culture, you’re able to really have an influence, as you’ve described, much broader than even those you just serve, but your donors and the community. Wow.

**Vann:** I had a call one time not long ago where a gentleman called me up, and his first words were, “I’m a lawyer.” That’s usually not a good start to a conversation. “I’m from the IRS.” That’s about the only way it could go worse at that point. But he said, “My dad died after 65 years of marriage, and we were trying to get my mom to let go of some of her stuff. We finally got her to do that, and I was down here helping her. Three of your guys came in to help us donate some of my dad’s stuff, and about halfway through moving things out of our house, the driver of the truck asked my mom, ‘Are you doing okay?’”

She kind of teared up and mentioned the dad’s death. He said, “Guys, let’s just talk with her for a second.” Each one of the men shared how God had changed their life through the ministry at St. Matthew’s House. They came in needing clothing. The guy had the wherewithal, I think inspired by the Holy Spirit, to say, “You know, your husband provided well for you…” Because she lived in a beautiful condominium on the beach.

He said, “But now even in his death your husband is providing for men like me to have our lives changed. So let’s just take a minute and thank God for your husband and for your family.” The lawyer shared this story, and I said, “Did we do something wrong?” He said, “No. My mom wants to know
when you can come back and get more of our stuff.” The focus was on ministering to people rather than just doing business.

Al: What a great story. Vann, I know you’re also a member of the C12 Group, the popular, prominent, nationwide peer advisory group of Christian CEOs and business owners. Why does tackling the health of your culture matter to you from a faith perspective? I know they talk a lot about that at C12.

Vann: C12 has been a real blessing, because it has helped me keep focused on current and basic business principles but always to do it in a faith context. One of the things we’ve done is we invest in our leadership team. C12 is not just the CEO roundtable, but it’s an opportunity to identify key players, men and women in our organization who have a significant area of influence whose growth I want to commit to. We have 11 of our team who are key players.

In our local market, we have more people involved in a monthly commitment to reflect, to hold each other accountable with integrity outside of work and in work so that we walk together into business excellence, ministry excellence, and prayer and support for each other. That kind of professional commitment to strengthen each other has really blessed me personally. I feel like I’m a better leader because I meet with other CEOs in other industries, and they tell me where I need to maybe look at some things.

A couple of years ago, I was at the point of frustration about a couple of things in my own life, thinking, “Should I move on to something else in life?” and my group challenged me and said, “You know, you’re the boss. If you don’t like your job, what are you doing to change it?” I needed other bosses to tell me, “Hey, it is my job. If I don’t like what I’m doing, it’s me who has to fix it. I can’t wait for somebody else to do it.”

It saved my job, just having that group of peer accountability, being vulnerable. I think being teachable is one of the keys to success in life. If you’re not teachable, if you know everything, you’re in trouble. So I’m always being challenged to read more, to learn, and to grow, and to learn from so many others.

Al: That’s a great summary. Vann, I’ve really enjoyed all we’ve learned today. I love the fact that you said that after the Best Christian Workplaces survey experience you’re now actually happier, particularly happier being with people, which was one of the things that came out of the discussion, that in order to even increase the level of trust and communication for them to be more interactive with the leadership, and the way you’ve done that.

Also I love the suggestions you’ve had for us about building on strengths. For example, extreme ownership, how that’s just part of your culture (and I can see that), where people are really solution oriented, that not only do you want to be the best ministry in the area but the best business in Florida, and how a healthy culture trumps everything. Those are great thoughts. Given all you’ve experienced
in the ongoing transformation and greater health of your culture, give us one final thought you’d like to leave with ministry leaders.

**Vann:** When I think about where we are and where we’re going, where other people are... God is creative, and God is always working to impact the world around us. We don’t need to rest on what we’ve always done. There is no one specific entity or part of our organization that’s sacred. Our mission is sacred. God has called us to impact the world around us. So if I have to change something in the thrift store or stop doing thrift stores...

Whatever God is calling us to, it’s his plan and his purpose. So our growth strategy, our business strategy has been simple: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and then all these things will be added unto you.” Again, if you’re faithful in a little, God will make you faithful over much. We haven’t focused on growth; we’ve focused on faithfulness. In so doing, God has brought the increase in ways we didn’t count on.

I could not have dreamed when I started here that I would be leading as big a team and with as big a budget and as many resources, and I couldn’t imagine Al coming down and telling me we had a great culture survey when I started, but it was about being faithful with every little opportunity and trying harder to press into that element of “What is God’s faithfulness in this about?” and then God brought about the increase. We get so often focused on growth or strategy or those things, and it’s just, “God, how do you want me to be a better steward of the resources you’ve given me with the opportunities I’m blessed with?”

**Al:** That’s a great summary, something all A-type CEO leader types need to hear over and over again, even in Christian ministry, that it’s our job to be faithful. Not to be successful, not to be at the top of the growth list or on the success list, but to be faithful and let God bring the increase. Vann, thanks for sharing your wisdom, your insights, your stories, your heart. I really appreciate that, and thank you for extending your ministry to the leaders who have been listening and benefiting from all you’ve shared with us today.

**Vann:** Thanks, Al. I look forward to seeing you when you’re down visiting your mom. I so much appreciate you and the team you have assembled there. God bless you, and have a great day.

**Al:** I appreciate that, Vann. To our listeners, I want to thank you for joining us on the Flourishing Culture Podcast and for investing this time in your workplace culture today. If there’s a specific insight, a story, an action step you’ve enjoyed in these past few minutes, please share it with others so they can benefit as well, and please review the show wherever you listen to podcasts.

This program is copyrighted by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. All rights reserved. Our writer is Mark Cutshall, our social media assistant is Solape Osoba, and this is Al Lopus, reminding you that a
healthy culture drives greater impact and growth for your organization. I’ll see you again soon on the Flourishing Culture Podcast.

**Male:** For a free transcript of today’s podcast, visit blog.bcwinitute.org. Join us next week for another one-to-one interview with a respected Christian leader. The Flourishing Culture Podcast with Al Lopus is a presentation of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, helping Christian organizations set the standard as the best, most effective places to work in the world.