

# Creative Community:

## Creating Community When You Can't Gather

### Conversation with Todd Carter:

Lead Pastor, Pathway Church

#### **TJ**

Hey, Todd. So thanks so much for doing this and being willing to jump in here with us and kind of chat with us. Tell me a little bit about yourself [and] what you do. ]

#### **Todd**

Well, TJ, super glad to be able to be here today. A little bit of my story is unique. First of all, I'm the Lead Pastor at Pathway Church. I've been there as Lead Pastor for about 14 years. I've actually been on staff though for 33 years total and grew up at Pathway, and so from that standpoint, my journey's been a little bit unique in the sense of I've literally almost held every role that you could have at the church.

#### **TJ**

That's awesome, man, that's awesome. So tell us so for those you know, I'm pretty familiar with Pathway and obviously, we know each other, but tell me about something about Pathway. Tell me about kind of the history of the church and what you guys do and what things look like, especially before we all had to kind of shelter in place.

#### **Todd**

In the in brief, our history is that we started in in a little school on the west side of town called Peterson School back in 1959. Then we moved. We had one location over on 10th up the road. For over 30 years, and then in 2003, we actually moved and build a new facility at 21st and Maize Road. And then since that time, we really began to explore kind of a new paradigm, a different way of really trying to accomplish our mission. And so then in 2012, we launched our Goddard campus. And then in 2017, we launched our Valley Center campus, and so we're a multi-site church, one church in multiple locations, and it's been a good journey.

#### **TJ**

That's awesome. And so how is like this, COVID-19, kind of affected how you guys are meeting? Obviously the governor just issued that they amended the stay in place order to include religious organizations, but I know you guys were already complying. So how's that changed things for you?

#### **Todd**

A huge game changer from like every front, certainly from just a week in and week out. You know, of course we went to you know, we already had an online experience. But obviously kind of with all these changes, it's really created a circumstance where we really wanted to make our whole online experience a lot more robust. And so especially in the first two weeks for sure, I mean, we were really trying to figure out how to execute it to be able to improve it, so that everybody at home could have the best kind of online experience we could. And so that was a big adjustment. [It] used to be we just kind of set up a camera and just let everything kind of roll, but now almost all the elements now are pre-produced, so that we can be able to deliver the best kind of experience for people to be able to experience online church.

**TJ**

Absolutely, absolutely. And even your team, because I know meetings are a huge part of how you gather because you've got folks in multiple locations and trying to maintain that continuity across all three sites, like have you guys as a team adjusted to that?

**Todd**

Well, it's had a couple different iterations. You know, ... since churches are a part of essential services, initially, in terms of the staffing, we were still gathering at the church and meeting at the church to do meetings ... of just the staff. But certainly here, actually, this week, we've kind of been slowly moving to it. But this week, we went full blown in terms of everybody went to working from home and actually, probably the last two weeks, we were trying to kind of ramp up, make sure that everybody had the capacity to work at home, and had the infrastructure to work at home. You know, for example, a lot of probably business and organization, nonprofits, churches, you know, we went and made sure that everybody could function on top of like a Microsoft Teams platform, so that we could all be connected and be able to do, you know, video meetings and everything else real simply and cleanly. And so that was about a week and a half or more to kind of get all that the infrastructure ready to go. But this past Monday, then we all went, kind of working from home, there still are some things that, obviously, that we do at the church in terms of producing the service and things like that. But we've all kind of decentralized ourselves and all working from home.

**TJ**

Absolutely. And that's, I appreciate you saying that it went through a couple different iterations. I think that for us has been part of this. It's really this time for experimentation, for trial and error, for kind of figuring out like, okay, so this is working for us. This isn't and even, you know, as an as a creative agency, we, you know, we still had to get some tools in place that we just hadn't had to use before. That were all new for us. You know, we had a webcam set up in the office to do group meetings in that context, but we'd never had to do that from individual homes and so we had to go get mics and you know, to make sure we could shoot from multiple locations, so it's just taking those kind of pivoting and trying to figure out, like I said, What is what does this actually look like? So, right, um, I know a huge part of what you guys do is following Jesus in community for others. It's a huge part of how you guys operate in the unity piece. Like, how are you doing that now? How are you creating community or building community when you can't gather together?

**Todd**

That's a good question. I think it still is probably for everybody, it's still kind of a work in progress. But we've obviously, we had some things in motion. And now we've tried to kind of up that. So first of all, one of the things that we've done is, we've really tried to mobilize and equip all of our existing small groups that have groups of people in the church that already currently gather together, maybe in a homes and so on and equip them and inspire them to continue meeting. But to do that through, you know, like, like we're doing TJ A zoom call. So really trying to facilitate that. And then layered on top of that, how do we keep engaging people because obviously, maybe in an unprecedented way, one of the silver linings from a church perspective is that, you know, now people have lots of time, the major way that they can connect with other people and culture is, is digitally. And so people are kind of looking for some more, you know, new content, or help or hope, or new kind of types of connections. And so obviously, you know, we've seen, obviously, our online viewership, our weekend services go way up. So now creates an opportunity to try to get people connected at a deeper level. And so we've launched a lot of virtual small groups, where you know, where the our campus pastors are hosting a kind of a Facebook group where they take the they look at the message from the previous weekend and try to look at it in a little bit deeper level. And so that's kind of created some new opportunities. So we're trying to take some stabs at not only facilitating our existing groups what they were doing, but trying to, in essence, really try to leverage some opportunity that we have with new people, as they're maybe getting connected digitally to the church for the very first time.

**TJ**

That's awesome. I think there's a lot of folks who are trying to figure out like, you know, how to how to have those relationships, how to continue those pieces, in an era in which, you know, you're so used to having those conversations, you know, informally, or accidentally, you know, a huge part of my life has been, you know, intentionally bumping into people, you know, like, knowing that, like, hey, if I go to this coffee shop at this time, I'm going to see, you know, I'm going to see, Marty like, I'm going to get to visit with him, like, I know, he's going to be there. And so, and now all of a sudden, those pivots are different. And so it's been this change of like, how to be like I've had to really, as somebody who tends to be, you know, in between an introvert/extrovert line, I've had to be more intentional about making sure to find people to connect with people. Because it really is easy to kind of fold in on the crisis you're dealing with in your own household with riots and all that. So that's awesome. I think I think it's going to be fun to see how that changes things. But I know part of what you guys do part of like a normal rhythm of every church is weddings and funerals. And I know like, especially for weddings, we're coming into that season where those get really busy. As a community of faith, like those big milestone events, how have those changed?

**Todd**

Well, the first I would say major experiment, at least that I was engaged in was actually our Senior Pastor that maybe some people in our community might be familiar with. His name was Gene Carlson. He was the Pastor at Pathway for 42 years. He passed away just about a week ago, Saturday, and so we were "What we were going to do in terms of his service?" So actually, this last Friday, we hosted our first, in essence, kind of virtual funeral, and so we did a live service that was, you know, that we put on Facebook Live. And we did through our church online platform live, where we broadcasted that funeral service. And so then, you know, you had to rethink a few of the elements in the service. But in many, in many ways, there was a lot of it that was very much the same. But it was just trying to be sensitive to the fact that there's a whole bunch of people online that are experiencing that. And so the interesting part about that is in the end, you know, you think about I mean, even though Gene was a very high visibility, community figure, you know, a lot of times you'd say somebody like that maybe was going to have a service that was, uh, you know, maybe 700 to 1000 people or something that would have been a really big service. Well, from an online perspective, you know, really our general observation was probably, you know, we had people number one that were from all over the world, a lot of connections that were that he had tried to travel a lot, and you know, we probably ended up having between, you know, conservatively between 1000, 2000 people viewing it online. So in the end even though those things are, are biblical in some ways or there's certainly different than what we've ever done before we have there's also we always have to see try to look for some of the silver linings of some of the things that have the change that we're going through. Now obviously everybody experienced a little bit of grief in the sense of change, not just the sense of the loss of someone but we all feel this just this grief of change right now. But there's also some silver linings that I think we can we can try to celebrate or enjoy or appreciate that can I think give us some hope and some light in the middle of a difficult situation.

**TJ**

Absolutely. I got to I got to view the service. I met Gene one time and it was a real profound moment for me. And I know like there's a lot of people that I care about that I know Gene had a major impact on, you being one of them and me just you know, having grown up in that church and him being the pastor there for so long, like, I know his influence was far felt. And when I saw that he passed, I thought, "Oh, this couldn't be a worse time for this to happen," like the community needs to be able to mourn and to celebrate him well, and then when I got to watch the service, I was like, "Oh, they are. They are mourning and celebrating." Well, it's, it's just, it's not what I expected. You know, it's not what I had, when I was used to and so yeah, I definitely think it's that learning of, Okay, what does this look like? And I love what Larry did during the service of, hey, jump in here with comments about, you know, it's like a virtual guestbook, so that we can turn around and share those with the family. I thought that was such a neat way to allow folks to kind of participate in talking about somebody who was a major figure in a lot of people's lives. Yep, definitely. So that was awesome. That's, uh, yeah, it's again, it's that season of learning and leading. So having grown up in Pathway, especially having a grip gone through all these different iterations, like I know you even worked in the it part of Pathway for a period of time.

Exactly. So what is there? Is there something in your past, whether it's a failure or a crisis that you've gone through, or even just a season of change in your own life, maybe it's a big wind that you had that's prepared you to kind of lead through this or helped you at least give you some that you're kind of going back to the draw off of those experiences to kind of try to navigate this new situation.

### **Todd**

I think that you know, it's interesting, but we do a podcast every week. And I was talking with Shane during that podcast, and he asked me a similar question. And ... it was weird. Just answering this question, in some ways, almost created a visceral response in me, in the sense of I don't know if I could point to one thing, but I certainly can say I can point to like five or six mini crises that I think over you know, the last even five years of stress and a crisis that we've been through, you know, just different kinds, that the big thing is that certainly, God has been faithful in the past, you know, through to be able to say it was really hard, it was difficult, but we made it and on the other side, he did something good. And being able to know that, you know, like that we're, you know, from my kind of frame of reference, you know, being a pastor, I think about like what it says in Psalm 139, where it talks about God goes before us. And he comes behind this, and that no one that like, even in the middle of our situation right now, even though that I think that just that sense of knowing that God has been faithful in my past, he's going to be faithful in my future. And even though I feel some certainty in these moments, because I can't see the future, and nobody can see the future. Because nobody in the history of the Earth has ever experienced this. And so but I know because I've seen God be faithful so many times in my life. He's gonna be faithful. Have this and so, I think that because of some of the pain and I know everybody has some of those things, especially maybe the Christ followers that are listening to this, that they've had bad experiences in their past crises that they've been through in their business and they're personally "God's been faithful he's going to be faithful on the other side of this." Another famous verse that maybe people who are Christ followers would be familiar with is you know, that we know that in all things God works for the good for those loved them and have been called occurred according to His purpose we know that God's going to use bad things not from God, I believe that are from Satan ultimately, or from the evil one of this world to be able to create something good on the other side so that I think that for me personally, that the crisis of my past and different ways has given me hope in the middle of this because I've seen God be something.

### **TJ**

Yeah, you know, I really appreciate that answer because there's nothing that is comparable like I was trying to explain to my kids. I know that school was closed a couple times when I was a kid, like once the school burned down. And so my particular elementary school didn't meet for the rest of the year, like we just got out early. And like once or twice there was the there was, you know, flu that broke out in the area so much that I had to close school for a couple days. It was it like, I have no reference point for all of life grinding to a halt and right, you know, and trying to explain, like, what this feels like and what this looks like, I don't have anything for them. But I also know it's going to be okay. Like, I don't know what that looks like yet. I don't know what that means entirely. But I know, up to this point in my life, you know, things have always worked out because God has always been active in whatever is going to happen. And even if it's not what I want or what I expect. It's always been good. It's always it's always been positive. So that's awesome. And especially as you guys as an organization, like this is a whole new reality. Are you seeing some stuff in the community in particular where you can look around and see different people trying different things that, especially just like even here in the greater Wichita area that you would look at and be like, man, I am proud to be a part of a community with somebody who's doing something like that?

### **Todd**

When I think I'm just seeing the broad brushes ... You can see some of the things maybe at a very micro level, as you know, I've never seen so many people walking around in the neighborhood in all my life, and then having great opportunities to be able to engage with people. And I think some of the thing that's been interesting, I think, that the situation is created is that we all know that we're in a common situation. I think people are, are friendlier than they've ever been more open to giving help than they've ever been. And I think people are working to be creative. You know, there's some of the little small things that I've seen that I think are

having some great ripple effects you've seen before. We'll try and take steps to be able to help people that are in the restaurant business, you know, to be able to, to give grants to those people or I talked to a guy yesterday on the phone that is trying to kind of orchestrate a debt forgiveness for people who have medical debt, because of some of the, the bills that probably they're going to incur as a result of some of the Coronavirus. People that get sick as a result of that. And so you're seeing people like that, you know, trying to help segments of the community began to kind of rise up able to support the notion that, you know, this is affecting all of us and all of a sudden, different kinds of ways but really trying to go after some of those groups of people in the segments of our community that know are going especially need help.

## **TJ**

Absolutely. I was at the grocery store the other day, you know, we've kind of pivoted to where I'm the only one that goes now for the family and we try to only go once every about 8-10 days trying to time things Depending on how well I get my list together, but I was there the other day, and I heard this guy thanking the person who is restocking the shelves, in all of my 38 years, I'm not sure I've ever seen somebody, thank somebody for stocking shelves. Like, I just don't think I've ever seen that kind of, like, consciousness of other human beings in the world. It was just, it was awesome. Like, it was one of those moments that was like, I'm gonna remember that, like, that's gonna hang with me because you just don't, you know, I do think people tend to want to do what's good for others, you know, you those handful of stories make the news of you know, somebody coughing at people at Walmart or whatever, but like, my experience is, is that little thing or like my one of my kids teachers has already reached out and said, "Hey, you know, when's a good time to call?" Like [to] make sure and talk to him on the phone, at least once a week for the till the end of school, to the summer. And like, just like that's an above and beyond thing. That's just awesome. So I'm with you there. So do you think you're going to see, you know, we've talked about it a little bit, but what do you what changes do you hope to see? Or do you think we'll end up seeing on the other side of this? Like, I do think whatever this is, it will change things long term for us as a country, what do you think we're gonna see?

## **Todd**

Well, a couple things. Number one is, and you've already kind of said it in a way, everybody needs to get ready for a new normal, things are not going to go back to the way that they used to be. And I think one of them is the what, in essence, the situation has forced everybody much more into a digital mode of communication. And I think, on the other side of that, digital methodologies of communication, are going to just are going to continue to rise we already knew it. And this situation really forced everybody's hand to say, to be able to kind of convert, you know, all our modus operandi have to communicate does that mean I know on the other side of this, we're going to be having a lot more meetings that are going to be facilitated by videoconference. That's going to be that's going to be standard. Yeah, even in the church world, we're going to see, I think we're going to see people meeting less face to face together already. That was a challenge for people. So for example, like in my small group, we meet every, you know, in the old school, so to speak, we met every week together. I can see potentially in the new school, that we will meet twice a month, and we'll meet virtually the other two weeks of the month. One of the things that I'm seeing already is that in terms of mobilizing some of it in a church setting, which could be similar in a business setting, is that already I'm seeing volunteer teams, where a face of where a campus pastor has a Facebook Live meeting for that particular group of volunteers where he's sharing some information. People are asking questions during the Facebook Live session that he's answering. And then all the people that missed that maybe that meeting they just go back and they can watch that that meeting later on through the Facebook Live vehicle. And so to me, that's, that's part of the of the signal. The other thing, I think that's going to be a reality in every business and nonprofit, I think everybody knows financially everything's going to be different on the other side. You know, we're coming to grips with that reality we've already been least some weeks already set up we've seen a 40% reduction in terms of what our income is. Some weeks haven't been that bad, but I'm telling you on the other side for every business and nonprofit things are going to look financially different. So then I think it helps everybody zero in and say, let's really core essential about what we're doing. So I think this, what's going to what we're going to see is everybody get a little bit more laser focus. But the core of their, their business or their mission really is that I think we in a previous time, you could maybe be a little sloppier about it. Because sometimes having some resources can cover over sloppiness. But in

the new reality, we're not going to have those extra resources to be sloppy. Every business and nonprofit on the other side of this is going to have to get more laser focus. The other thing that I just just because it's on the top of my head, right now, I think just in terms of because this digital communication thing is going to be so much a part of our new world reality. Our new normal on the other side of this... I was working with our communication director. We were looking at the schedule every day of all the different communications that we were sending out, you know, email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook Live, and then you know you're having to, you're gonna have to think through all that I think every business and nonprofit is going to have to really clearly look at their communication strategies and make sure, just because you're doing lots of things doesn't mean that's all effective. So I think there's going to be reviewing our communication strategy, especially right now, every two weeks, because in the last two weeks, we've changed. I mean, we iterated we're, we've had to change our communication strategy, because we've already learned some things are working, some things are not we added a whole bunch of things, we probably need to subtract a few things off the off the menu, because people in the end, if you've got too many vehicles out there trying to communicate, it's just it begins to be white noise, nobody hears anything. So I think we're going to have to be intentional on that side as a part of the new normal. So I think those will be three things that certainly in the new normal that are going to be significantly different.

**TJ**

Absolutely. I do. You're right. And I love the idea of like having to revisit I mean, that's, you know, again, we're, we're constantly like, Alright, so we tried this, you know, what does that look like? And we've tried this, what does that look like, and seeing, like, what works, what's effective, and I was talking with a friend who was back east. And he was sharing like, you know, my boss wants me to submit what I do. But part of the challenges like when I'm in the office, I have 30% more things that I have to do, because there's meetings and stuff. And he said, Now doesn't look like I'm doing anything. But what you've done is you've exposed like, all the, there's 30% of your day, that was non-essential to what you guys are doing as an organization. Like there's 30% of your day, that was going to meetings he was in the publishing industry, there's going to meetings about things that you know, are unnecessary, that you're no longer in like you don't have to be in the room anymore. And I think I think the benefit of that long term is going to be more meaningful work, better output. Have a quality of product and a better work experience for people. I think ultimately, like, we're going to see some of those shifts, that'll be exciting. But it'll be interesting to watch it all unfold. I mean, I, up to this point, I would not have predicted that we'd be here so I have no idea what it's gonna look like. Are there any questions that I should have asked or any questions that come up as we've walked through this?

Todd

Not at the moment, because we talked a little bit [of everything] to make sure that we kind of hit everything along the way.

**TJ**

Yeah, awesome. So how can people keep up with you? What in their cities, if there's some places they keep up with you personally or keep up with Pathway Church? Are [there] some things you want to highlight that while they're doing that they could go and check in on you guys?

**Todd**

The easiest way to kind of follow what's going on Pathway churches, I think is probably the Facebook page. That's the easiest thing to be able to follow you know, Pathway Church. You look up on Facebook, which we have several different Facebook pages. And in terms of each of our channels. This is app one. And then on our website obviously pathwaychurch.com. People can track what's going on there. But it's it's exciting. I think we're just in a new world. And I think that the new world on the other side of this is there's some uncertainty, obviously because nobody knows it. But I think be able to keep looking for all the silver linings just like even you highlighted about how that in the end that some of the use of virtual groups and everything else could end up helping people make a more meaningful and productive work. That's a silver lining on the other side of this and it's changed. That's a little stressful. I think all of us to adjust to a new normal always is stressful in the end

on the back on the other side of it, then we'll think oh, this was a good thing. I mean, even for me, I mean, I can say this selfishly, I preach on Saturday, and the whole rest of my weekends free.

## **TJ**

You get to participate in in the service fully because you're not, you know, having to stay focused on like, hey, I'm getting ready to go do this. You're able to actually participate and participate with your family, which is just awesome.

## **Todd**

So some good things on the other side, I think maybe a learning in that is because all of our attention is classically focused on all the things that are uncertain and that we're afraid of. But to be able to try to have a little bit of a shift of mindset to say, we're on the silver linings here and and try to even I haven't tried to engage myself with other people that I know have a better tendency to look at those things that I do. And that helps me helps me get kind of refocused on some of those great opportunities and silver linings even in the middle of the situation.

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