



**A Pastor at Heart:**  
**More with Veronica Cannon**  
May 2, 2024

**Transcript**



Sara Hayden: In your rich experience as a pastor, what does it take for a congregation that is delivering a stale, boring ritual-

Veronica Cannon: (laughs).

Sara: ... divorced of meaning or just entertainment, what do we have to do to get to that point?

Veronica: With worship...and I always say that, "Worship should challenge people."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: That's part of what Spirit-inspired worship is about, now-

Sara: Wow.

Veronica: Sometimes when I do these presentations and workshops that I'm talking about Spirit-inspired worship in particular-

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: ... I say, "I kinda get myself in trouble with this particular mark," because I tell people that, "Worship should challenge you. And if worship is not challenging you, you need to find another church."

Sara: Wow.

Veronica: Worship should teach out some... You should always be learning something. If you're not learning anything in your worship service, you need to find another church.

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: Worship should transform you, it should change something about your heart, your mind. And your spirit should be transformed. You should never walk out of a church on a Sunday morning the same way you walked in. If it's not transforming you, you don't need to be a part of that church. You should always have an encounter with the Lord. Your worship of Christ should always bring you into some kind of encounter where you meet the Lord in a new and refreshing way in some way. Either it is something that will draw you up or cut your legs out from under you if you think too highly of yourself. You should have an encounter with the Lord.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: If you don't have an encounter with Jesus Christ on Sunday mornings, you need to find a different church to worship in.

Sara: That's a problem.

Veronica: Yes.

Sara: (laughs).

Veronica: I also believe that Spirit-inspired worship should convict you of something. You should be convicted by the Holy Spirit. Something in worship should say, "I have got to do better. I have got to be better. I can do more for others. I should start doing this because I haven't been. I should pray more, I should read scripture more, I should learn to love my neighbors more." Something-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: ... about your worship should convict you.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: And you should never ever walk out of any worship service the same way you walked in. Something about you should be different.

Sara: My goodness.

Veronica: And I think many of our churches are so caught up in doing things decently and in order that we forget about that. And people are not touched.

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: People are not moved. People don't have those encounters.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: And I think that that is unfortunate in a lot of our churches; not all, but a lot.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: Because we get so caught up and want to do things decently and in order, and we don't allow for Spirit to move.

Sara: It strikes me in one of the examples that we've explored of that moment where you asked in the worship service in episode one of our conversation, you call out to the congregation, "Can someone take the children and do something with them, you know, while we attend to this?" Your sensitivity to that, but also your trust that the moment that tossing the ball to someone else who you believe Jesus is also

with who may not be trained for this particular moment, but knowing the Holy Spirit will sort of tap in someone to do what needs to be done in a moment of urgency, it's such a concrete example, obviously. It's like, maybe we need an hour of time with the kids outside of the sanctuary in that moment. But I could kinda sense my own empathy for that person or people who stepped up to the challenge and maybe how glad they were that they were trusted as people of the church to rise to the occasion in a moment of newness and uncertainty.

Veronica: What comes to mind to me is that people have to be trained. And so sometimes training doesn't always come where you just sit them down and teach them, sometimes I think-

Sara: Hmm.

Veronica: One of the things my husband used to say is that, "The best sermons is not one that people hear but one that people see."

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: And I think that when people see how you can think on your feet in other situations... 'cause I think you have to-

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: ... learn how to do that. You have to be adaptable. You have to learn how to adapt to any situation that arises. And not everybody can do that well. I don't do it perfectly. But I do think that I'm pretty good at that. And I think that when people see that in you, you can help other people to adapt. And some of that comes just through giving some instruction and also learning how to remain calm in situations where other people are blowing up and getting nervous and getting frightened about things. I think a lotta times what has to happen is you have to train people by the way you do things.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: When you see how you respond, you can help them to respond likewise.

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: And in that instance where I say, "Can someone take the children out and do something with them?" It was like, "Read them a story or something like that," they learn. And you have people who also love children in the church and realize that this could be frightening for them-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: ... to see somebody on the floor, and so you don't want that to be a memory that they hold, so you try to escort them out quickly. And I had people who understood that. But also, they see how you react calmly, and so they can do likewise. You just sorta can train people in your actions-

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: ... and not just your words.

Sara: Yeah.

Sara: You and I were both in, um, New Orleans recently-

Veronica: Right.

Sara: ... for this awesome time when our 1,001 New Worshiping Communities leaders, Vital Congregations leaders came together to enjoy the city, to enjoy our connections with each other with Jesus-

Veronica: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... within my own particular group... Apprentices who are listening will probably recognize this moment 'cause I have this carefully curated, really cool encounters around the city. One of the moments that I wanted to happen on Tuesday night was predicated on the time that the sun set over the river in the Crescent City. And we had to get to the Crescent Park in New Orleans. This beautiful, powerful view of all these different neighborhoods in the city, the barges that were crossing as the river flows out into the water of the ocean, just a glorious place. And I'd timed it perfectly. You know, "Everybody get sort of their rest. We'll come back together in the evening." We're gonna get to the park, right, the perfect moment the sun goes down. And at this time, we're also filming a documentary style video of some 1,001 New Worshiping Community leaders, so it's also being filmed at that moment, so I'm, like, super rigid about it. I'm trying to be cool, but everything's gonna work out.

And then we can't get our transportation setup in that moment. Like, there's a car in the parking lot, and it can't get out because of traffic. And the clock is ticking, you know, five minutes. It's gonna be 15 minutes, it's gonna be 20 minutes. And, like, I'm in denial for the first 15 minutes, and then eventually, I'm like, "This is not going to happen no matter how much I want to will it to happen that we're gonna get there on time." Half the group is there not knowing the instructions because I was gonna, like, do it in the moment, right, at this perfect sun setting time.

Veronica: Mm.

Sara: The other half is with me being, like, super angsty. And I'm like, "I gotta chill out enough in my mind," feeling the pressure of, I'm the only one. Like, literally, that was what I was thinking. Like, I have to be there to explain what were very simple instructions. It never occurred to me for 30 minutes while I waited for this car that I could, like, text someone who's there and say, "Will you just ask them to do this thing?" It was essentially the plot of *Moana*, I now realize.

Veronica: (laughs).

Sara: Was this, like, look at the water and say, "Tell me who I am." Right?

Veronica: (laughs).

Sara: It was like, you know, "Just be with God in that moment, these sites, this incredible city in front of us, the channel, the experiences that you've had this year, and just, like, listen to the Spirit speaking to you." But the irony was I could not listen to the Spirit in that moment to help me until later it occurred to me, like, why don't I just text someone and say... Ask them this question. It just strikes me in that moment that was really difficult for me, I guess, when I look at myself generously in that moment of, like, wow, Sara, it really took you a long time to realize the church is the Body of Christ, which was actually our scripture for the week (laughs).

Veronica: (laughs).

Sara: I've got all these eyes and ears and feet at, oh, the Body of Christ there, but, like, the one I am, whatever I am, has gotta be the one to catalyze this devotional. And, you know, I said to some of the folks when our car finally came, I was like, "I'm gonna admit I was, like, kinda stressed about this, right? Like, I was worried the sun was coming down. I want y'all to have this moment. I'm disappointed." And two of my colleagues in this cohort, two new worshiping community leaders were like, "We totally get it." They were so understanding. It helped to talk about and process my own adherence and, like, holding on so tightly to what I thought was the plan, however, quote, "Spirit-led" it felt and realizing, like, if I had just opened my mouth and said, "Lord, I need help. I have all these brothers, sisters, siblings around me," they would've helped me, you know? Like, that was so silly, retrospectively.

Veronica: And yet God's grace abounded, right?

Sara: Yeah, absolutely.

Veronica: Yeah, in spite of everything, God's grace was there.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: People said, "It's okay. We understand." You can't control the traffic, you can't control any of those things. And you couldn't stop the sun from setting.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: But they were still there. And I'm sure they still saw the sunset.

Sara: They did, yeah (laughs).

Veronica: And it was probably still very beautiful even though you weren't there to see it with them. So-

Sara: Yeah.

Sara: I think the grace piece that we hold so dear in our faith, Presbyterians, boy, do we understand grace.

Veronica: Yeah.

Sara: I think I had to be willing to change a little to actually experience, acknowledge the grace, that I had to open myself up and realize I really needed that to actually be aware of it-

Veronica: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... and experience it.

Veronica: Yeah. I think that's what happens when we grow in God's grace and love, though, right? Because we realize (laughs) in situations like that and in others that it's really not about us anyway.

Sara: Yeah, I am not the point of this. Yeah.

Veronica: (laughs).

Sara: (laughs).

Veronica: And sometimes we learn those lessons... You know, yours was, I'm sure, very upsetting for you. And you learned a lesson from it, right? But sometimes we have to learn those same lessons in a very difficult and hard way that it's really not about us and we don't, we really don't have control over anything. No matter how much we think we do, God has ultimate control. And sometimes we learn that in some very dark ways. And we have to walk through those dark moments in order to get to the light and understand that it really is about God and not about us.

Sara: Veronica, obviously you... We've talked a lot about your experience ministering in congregations, which you have continued to do throughout your leadership of the Vital Congregations Initiative. Huge initiative that the Presbyterian Church USA invests in and is working on for the benefit of local congregations. What is it like to be in those two places? Like, do you sense that one is more... The pastoral role is clearer for people who you know who are Presbyterians in Louisville and beyond? How would you explain your role in the national office?

Veronica: I was told that a lotta people get confused about working for the national church. And it's not just PMA, but-

Sara: The Presbyterian Mission Agency. Yeah.

Veronica: The Presbyterian Mission Agency, yes. It's not just PMA but any part of the national church, that the national church is a corporation, hence corporate.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: And that is very different from working in church. And I hear that, and I understand that; it is a corporation. We serve the church, we help support the church in many different ways, all of us do it in different ways, but we support the church. But for me, because I am a pastor at heart, I take that pastor's heart into my work. And I'm very passionate about what we do in Vital Congregations. I do still pastor a small church in Waxhaw, North Carolina, but I am also very passionate about the work that we do at Vital Congregations. We are helping churches to become more vital. We are helping pastors to also become revitalized in their work because a, you know, being in ministry can be hard.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: And oftentimes, you could feel very much alone. And so by making connections, by helping churches to connect with one another by... We're gonna be doing cohorts with pastors, and my hope is that these pastors in their cohorts can really come to understand what it means to not feel alone and to have connections with other people who are going through similar things that they're going through. Since the pandemic, we have had so many churches, large and small, who have lost members, who have online worship services so that some people are saying they're never gonna come back to the building again.

Sara: Hmm.

Veronica: Some of them have these huge buildings that they don't know what to do with, and they're struggling. They wanna still be vital in their communities, but they don't know how to do it. And so I'm passionate about this work because part of my ministry is to help people have a vital relationship with Christ. It's back to that relationship thing again.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: But to have a vital relationship with Christ. If in my work with these churches and presbyteries, if in my work I can help them to become more vital in their work... And their work is in reaching the community. Because some of those people may not come to their churches, they may never darken the doors of their churches, but if I can help these congregations in any small way to really discern the needs of their congregation and the needs that their community has, even more importantly help them discern the will of God for that church in that community, to help build the body of Christ. Not they're gonna come to the church, not even that they may become Christian, but when I say, "Build the Body of Christ," it means showing forth who you are as a child of Almighty God so that others, when they see you, they will know that you are definitely a child of God.

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: And they will see Christ in you, and then they can say, "That church prays for people. That church helps feed people. That church helps you find shelter when you don't have it, or they provide shelter for you. That church is a church that really meets the needs of this community." And if that church were to disappear tomorrow, they would surely and certainly be missed. And so if you can help churches... If I can do my part to help churches with that, I'm good.

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: I'm good.

Sara: Wow. When you think about folks who are listening to this conversation from their homes or in their cars, walking around in their neighborhoods, is there a practice or question that comes to mind that is something that you hold dear that you think would be useful to offer to our listeners?

Veronica: I would say perhaps something that I said before. If you can hold onto your relationship with God, it will help you get relationships with others correct-

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: ... or at improve them. Relationships, I think, are at the heart of my ministry. No matter what I'm doing, it's all based upon building relationships with others. And I say that it's interesting because I had a conversation with somebody just the other day. I've heard this all my life, and I laugh at it because I don't know where it comes from. I don't understand it (laughs)-

Sara: (laughs).

Veronica: ... but I have had so many people to tell me, "You know, Veronica, when I first met you, I thought you were snooty. I thought you were uppity. I thought you were bougie. I thought you looked down your nose at people." I would hear that a lot. Even my husband said when he first saw me, he thought, ooh, she's pretty-

Sara: (laughs).

Veronica: ... but I can't talk to her. I don't know what it is, I really don't. But I heard it again just recently from someone, and I just thought, wow, what is that? But people say, "That was my first impression of you. But after I got to know you, I came to understand that you're nothing like-

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: "... what I first thought of you." But I think that that comes with building relationships, right?

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: And that's why I think relationships are so important, because we can judge people, but that might not tell you the true story about a person. And likewise when I get to know other people. You, you could judge a book by its cover, right?

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: But that's not telling you all the chapters of their lives. And I think you really have to get to know people.

Sara: Wow, so true.

Veronica: So relationships would be what I would fall on.

Sara: Yeah. You do that in the way that you speak and embody what you believe. It's so powerful. It truly makes me feel alive in a new way in my faith. I mean, even just the conversation that we're having here about the work that we do that intersects in multiple ways, you have a gift that you so clearly and generously demonstrate that I am so grateful for. And I'm so thankful for this conversation with you.

Veronica: Thank you. It's been my pleasure.