

THE CHURCH PLANTING PODCAST

with Greg Nettle



Greg: Hey, everyone. Welcome to the church planting podcast. I'm Greg nettle. And I have the privilege of serving as president of stadia church planting on this episode of the church planting podcast. We have a very special guest. My friend, Steve Cuss. Steve is the author of the. Book managing leadership anxiety. It's an amazing read. And Steve has so much to say to church planters, church leaders, businessmen about how to deal and to lead in extraordinary situations that we face today when it comes to anxiety. Please welcome Steve cuss. So I'm here with my friend, Steve cuss and Steve, it's so great. Thank you for honoring us by being on the church planning.

Steve: You know, Greg, it's been a life ambition of mine to just be with somebody who was interviewed by Howard stern. So I love that's one of my favorite stories about you.

Greg: Let me tell you this. I, I I'm, I'm honored to be interviewing you. And I have a whole lot less leadership anxiety interviewing you than when Howard stern.

Steve: Yeah. That had to be an experience.

Greg: It was fun. It's Steve, I just, I have this, I, you know, I just want. Your, your book, your most recent book, managing leadership anxiety. I had to laugh because it's laying right here on my desk. My wife and I are just finishing up. We actually made the commitment to read it together and talk about it together. But I was smiling as I was looking through it because I have so much underlined and highlighted notes written in the margins. So you just want to give that a shout out to all of our listeners. If you haven't read it yet, managing leadership anxiety. Steve talk. Okay. What gives you the credibility to write this book?

Steve: Ah, yes, I think what gives me the credibility. I love that question. It's it's my own anxiety for sure. And then I'd probably the, the second source of credibility is the absolute insane situation of putting me as a 24 year old in a trauma hospital and doing hospice end of life. And particularly because I came into it as kind of a sales guy, I don't even know if I knew that about myself, but I knew how to work a room. I, I had what I would describe now as a pretty big false self. And so I think the other thing that that qualifies me is there's nothing like death and trauma to strip away pretense. And so it was stripped away from me very quickly. Like within hours of my first day on the job at 24. And I, I think I fell in love at that point with the gospel, like, oh man, Jesus does set us free. I am living for things that are, that are killing me. And so my, any other credibility is almost three decades now of working that way. And of course I was trained in a particular theory. I'd be happy to get into. I was trained in that theory as a chaplain, but I have no formal qualifications. I'm, I'm a pastor. That's what I did.

Greg: So that's, so you're trained in, in the, the whole idea of trauma therapy and anxiety and dealing with that and from your own life as we all have. And but you're also a pastor. So talk, give us just a little bit of your pastoral story as well.

Steve: Yeah, yeah. Grew up unchurched. I still, it's funny. I've been a Christian longer than I've not been a Christian, but I still kind of have. Point of view of an outsider? I think so. So I've probably like you have to, Greg, I've definitely shaped out church to really be concerned and think through the experience of an

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unchurched person. Cause that's my family. I'll be going home in June and it'll be my sister and I will be the only family members who are believers and I'll catch up with my parents [Steve] and cousins and have a great time. But they all think what we believe is nuts. So my pastoral experience is definitely formed by people like Tim Keller and Owen McManus, even though they're obviously wildly different people, but their passion to really help the unchurched person encounter God. That's my passion

Greg: ok, so you're a senior you're a senior pastor.

Steve: I was till Christmas, I stepped down at Christmas. So I now have a, I now work for a senior. I'm part-time at my church and then what we're doing here together as my full-time role now.

Greg: So talk a little bit about your, your role as senior pastor, just because we've got so many church planters and church leaders listening.

Steve: I think the challenge of senior posturing, I mean, we could take this to any number of ways. I think one of the top challenges is the number of hats we wear. It's fascinating. My wife's a trauma therapist and she's not allowed ethically by the state of Colorado to counsel friends. She won't generally counsel anyone in our church because she already has the pastor's hat or the pastor's wife hat. And yet pastors, we don't have that luxury. We, we always have multiple hats. So I think that's a huge challenge for pastors. Cause are your friends, your friends, or are they criticizing your job? Like you're the only friend that they talk about their job. And then in the same way, when you knock on your friend's door, are you going over to hang out or are you recruiting them or asking them for a donation? Like it's just complex. I personally think posturing and lead posturing is one of the most complicated vocations.

Greg: There's just so much, I'm so excited to unpack with you in this episode. But I was thinking about let's, let's go down this idea because it is really challenging because one, you know, as, as I served as senior pastor for 25 years of river, One of the things that was so challenging was that I knew so much about so many people within the church and that created some really strange dynamics, Steve, in our relationships. And just simple fact of when we talk about anxiety, Hey it. Okay. What is going on in your life now? And how much do I bring it up and follow up and so forth?

Steve: Yeah, that's right. Yeah. Yeah. My field is chronic anxiety. Which is a particular kind of anxiety that's generated by assumptions primarily. And then the second thing that generates chronic anxiety is false belief. So for example, when people come to meet me, maybe they visit my church for the first time. They know me as pastors before they know me as space, which is to say they have all these assumptions that they put on me and chronic anxiety out of all the different anxieties. That's the only anxiety disorder. And so I catch your assumption about me. So if you think I should, I don't know, preach ML Greek, for example, and an assumption I have about myself or a belief I have about myself is maybe I, I think I should please people then your assumption and my assumption kind of marry, in this unholy alliance and formed this massive anxiety. And then as a posture, I'm scarring around trying to keep everyone happy. That'd be one..

Greg: Or the general comment of, you know, I'm looking for deeper teaching, more in the word, right?

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Steve: I'm not being fed

Greg: Right. As pastors we're going, because we're wrestling with the word constantly in our sermon prep. And then people say something like that. Usually not even well-meaning. But it feeds an insecurity and anxiety in us, right.

Steve: That's right. That's right. Well, and what ha what, what is most common in generating? Anxiety is somebody makes a generalization and we make a specific interpretation from it. So, yeah. So, Hey, I'm not being fed. I, Greg, I don't know what the language for crime it is, but I'm an Aussie. What the hell does that mean? What does it yourself? What does it mean? But I make meaning. Because chronic anxiety is built on false belief. And so the meaning I make as well, then I must blank. And certainly will no longer be true to myself of what God's called me to do. And for pastorss, particularly, you know, most of us have strong people skills and, and the shadow side of that is this people pleasing. So one of the things I do early with pastorss is I coach them. Okay. What are your gifts from. Your chronic anxiety is almost always the shadow side of that gift. So if you're very pastorally aware, that's a gift, but you'll need to please people is your anxiety. And so this there's five broad categories. We can go into it, but, but we all kind of live for something. And when we don't. We then get very anxious clinically.

Greg: So let me, let me just, I just cause our specific audience, you know there are a couple really chronic anxieties that I think we as church planters, as church leaders, Really live with that are really unhealthy, that I would really hope we can get some, you know, some thoughts on today. One is just the, in the area of finances. Can you talk about some of the assumptions or false beliefs we make? I mean, th with church planners, you know, it's just constant, this, are we going to make it, or we're going to shut the doors. And, but quite frankly, as a mega church, pastor, you feel the same way. And it's kind of this chronic as a leader of Stadia. I still deal with it. Right. Talk about that a little bit.

Steve: Ah, that's a big one. Finances is a big one because it's what you're looking to try to figure out is what meaning am I making out of the lack? I don't want to open too many doors for as Greg in a quick interview, but there are 31 universal sources of anxiety and one of them is scary. So anytime you're in a scarcity situation and whether you're talking about global poverty or even just a simple church planter, trying to pay the bills, if you are in scarcity. And then a second generator is ambiguity. Anytime you're in ambiguity. And then a third generator is when, when somebody has to do something and it has to be you. So put those three together and you've got financial pressure for a church. And so what do we do about it? I mean, cause, cause it's kind of something that people live with. I mean, do we just learned to live with it? I think what you have to do, I do, you do have to learn to live with it. I think what's helpful for me is, is, is if anxiety is generated by assumptions than assumptions that are keeping us trapped. So we are afraid of what happens if, but almost always what happens if is not actually as disastrous as our anxiety is telling you. For example, just to get to the, what we would believe is the worst case scenario. The church closes. That's actually not as disaster. I mean, it's bad. I'm not meaning to minimize that, but it's not in fact, the end of the world. And it's also not a reflection on your skill as a pastor in Colorado, where I live there was about a five-year period was 16 church plants closed in our area. And I, I remember cause we were a church plant. We came close to closing in 2011. By that time we were 12 year old church. We were still struggling. And I remember thinking, like I knew I have a friends with some of the churches that closed the doors and I'm like, these

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are people that work hard. They're sharp. They love God, if that's not enough, what, but, but that's just the way it goes sometimes. So I do think you have to get [Steve] to the other side of your assumptions about money and then you, I mean, I don't mean to be crass, but you do have to live by faith. You have to say, this is God's. I'm doing the best I can. And then just, we could go any way with this, Greg, but it is somewhat of a saturated market. I mean, how difficult is it to get the attention of a pastor at a bigger church and get your project under their nose? Because you notice you get hit up all the time for causes you love so tough all the way around.

Greg: Yeah. And so one of the things that's helped me a little bit in dealing, you know, because of our life experience. Now, Steve, where we're at in life is just simply, I, I regularly tell myself when I was at Rivertrail, I would say, Hey, number one, this is the bride of Christ. It's God's, it's God's bride.

Steve: Right?

Greg: And God loves this bride as much as I love this bride, God loves this bride way more than I do. And I have to trust him. With this bride. Right. And so that takes some of the weight off, I guess, of anxiety, just to work with stadia church planting, man, God loves what stadia does. I know that with all my heart, because he loves lost people. He loves the next generation. And that helps me go to sleep at night because you know what, he loves this organization way more than Greg nettle does as much as I love Stadia it's it's his to ultimately all work hard, but it's all, ultimately he's the one that's going to provide or not provide.

Steve: Well, one of the detangling anxiety questions we have people ask is what is mine to carry? What is God's to carry and what is this to carry just, and I'll even have people in a general, just make three columns. Mine. God's.

Greg: Okay, let's go. So let's talk about that. What's okay. Let's deal with the issue of finances. Yeah. Okay. Let's let's just unpack those three questions a little bit.

Steve: Yeah. So let's talk about you and stadia. What's yours to carry your relaxing into God's. Providence is what you're describing as I hear you, but that doesn't mean you're lazy. You're still calling people. You're still putting the mission out there. So it's just you. You've what you're doing is you're figuring out a Greg. Responsibility and you're carrying that, but what happens is anxiety wants us to carry more than God wants us to carry. And so we end up worrying about God's job. We end up getting into the head of the person we asked money from, for example, and we it's few times there's, there's no benefit to me worrying about a donor. It doesn't gain anything. So just that simple clarity. Okay, Lord, what have you called me to carry? What are you. And I don't know if this helps Greg, but I blame God a lot from my lot in life. It's very helpful. I, the old Testament, prophet Jeremiah is who I learned it from, but Jeremiah is like, used to juice me into this. Like Jeremiah actually says, God used to use to me to be a prophet. I think you tricked me. And I'll often say to the Lord, look, if you wanted someone smarter who knew what they were doing, you should've got them in this. It's your fault. But here. And as long as I'm, I'm faithfully serving, I'm going to do the best I can and you'll do the, okay.

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Greg: So part of it then in that middle column is our, our view and understanding of God, right? As a providing parent who does want what's best and knows what's best. Talk about that third category though. The "Their's" category.

Steve: Well, I think we've all been frustrated at having a meeting with a donor that doesn't follow through. Right? Like they, they're all excited at the lunch and you really think they're going to give money and then nothing. You then cross into their brain. You start trying to think your way into them, writing you a check for example, and it's a waste of time. You better to pick up the phone and have a Frank conversation with them or let it go. But I think what's going on Greg is, is what I noticed in all the different ministries I've done. And I've had some pretty intense ministries. The lead pastor role was the hardest by far. And I think it's because it was the most. I, everything I did as a lead pastor, I took extremely personally, which I think is why I took criticism. So personally, if you criticize, it's kind of like someone talking about your dad, it's like, you don't, you don't talk about my dad. I get angry. It's, that's how it was with the church. And I love what you're saying. Cause I really did forget that it's God's church. Like they're slapping God. But my preaching, my leadership, all of that, my ability to raise money and build a build. I mean, it took us four capital campaigns to get from portable to dirt, to freaking civil engineering. No one told me that civil engineering is a million dollar day and then to building a building.

Greg: So one of the things we've done that, that I love Justin Moxley one of our team members actually started this at stadia and it has been so helpful. We celebrate the ask. Okay. So for instance, if I'm making let's just say a a hundred thousand dollars ask of someone we're not, we're not celebrating. If I say that let's say on a zoom call with our staff or in a staff meeting, I'll just say, Hey, I made an ask. I don't know if so-and-so is going to give that or not, or invest that Justin will stop us and they'll say, Your risk, you did your responsibility. God's going to do his deal. And we're going to celebrate the fact that you were faithful and it's in God's hands. Now it's up to them, but we can't celebrate, you know, our we've done our part. We celebrate that.

Steve: I really liked that. The other thing I really like about that is I, I think we expect ourselves to be experts with something we've never done before. Yeah. So I had to learn how to raise money. I had to learn how to lead a building campaign, but I expected myself to actually already know how to do something I'd never done. And, and I think that that kind of opens up another channel for pastors. I think there's more freedom and, and getting it over with, with your congregation as early as possible to let them know that you're a student. Yes, good. Especially young church planters. And what it'll do is it'll track some of the best people and some of the worst people, it will attract. When you're vulnerable, you'll attract amazing people who will help you. And you'll attract bullies who are trying to tell you what to do, but if you know that going in, you can figure them out much quicker. So I actually used vulnerability as a kind of a. Of what kind of person.

Greg: Okay. Let's, let's go down that path a little bit. So you're being very transparent and I've been with you before and right away, your vulnerability transfers into allowing me to be vulnerable and trust with you. Right. But let's talk to church leaders. How vulnerable should you be? I mean, talk about anxiety.

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Steve: Yep. I think my, my standards for pastors is, is I don't think we are the example. I just think we're responsible. I think the problem is, I think we tend to feel like we should be the example of a, of a pastors or, but really we're just responsible to make the decision. And so I think that frees you up to be an exactly human sized pastors. So to me, that looks like I, I let the church know when I made mistakes. I'll just tell the whole church. So, so in our first building. We wasted six figures, like a hundred thousand dollars in redesign. And I just told the church and it was something like this. I'm like, Hey, listen, here's what's going on. And it wasn't all our fault. Our city messed us around and [Steve] we didn't know better, but it also helped them to hear, look, I'm one of our biggest donors at this church. And so I've also wasted my money. Like if it's not just yours and your average church member will say, you know what? Fair enough. He's he's a decent guy. He surrounded himself with smart. And then your bullies will wheel that against you. And they'll mock you with it, although bad mouth, you and church plants absolutely attract both. They attract the best and the worst in the kingdom of. And I think the sooner a church planner can figure out who's who the healthier the church planter can be. Cause if you're not careful, you will chase those toxic people and try to win them over.

Greg: You know Steve it's it's I was kind of laughing when you said that you wasted six figures on design and stuff then because I had the absolute same experience at Rivertree it was awful. We flew in a company from California out here to Ohio. They did this big charrette and this. And then we never built it. I mean, we, we just, it wasn't what God was calling us to, but I had to do the same thing, stand in front of the church and say, Hey, listen, here's the deal. You know, messed up. But we believe this is where God's got us heading and not down this \$30 million, whatever build out that it was going to be. Thank God we didn't do that before the crash actually happened. But the point is we need to talk about our mistakes. We need to own them. Right. And that brings liberation and freedom. And certainly some criticism as well. Let me go, let me go here now. We're coming out of the pandemic. And there's, there's so much anxiety out there now with, with church leaders, are the people coming back? What would we be able to survive this? What do we do now? What, what are you seeing, you know, as a result of the pandemic, any tips there to help us as, as church leaders in this area.

Steve: Yeah, I love that question. I think the most important thing that a pastor can do is grow in your awareness of yourself. Take care of yourself. And here's the problem, Greg, is that sounds selfish. This is the lesson I learned as a chaplain. I would walk into a room where somebody is dying or just died, or I have to give them the worst news they've ever heard in their life. No one calls the chaplain to watch Seinfeld reruns. Like it's always the worst. And if I'm not aware of what's going on inside of me. I'm going to infect that situation with my well-meaning anxiety. For example, maybe I'm feeling the pressure to say just the right thing, and I'm no longer able to see what's required because I'm busy trying to manage my anxiety. So what I've noticed in the pandemic is it, it is a bit like trauma chaplaincy had just put us all into some kind of a trauma situation. And th the theory that I teach systems theory it's very simple. It says that that what people normally do is if you're anxious, I feel like I must calm you down so I can be okay. That would be normal human behavior. If you're anxious, I have to calm you down. So if your toddler has a meltdown in the supermarket, I'm anxiously trying to calm you down. System theory says the opposite. It says when you're anxious, I'm going to calm myself down. So you can, it's exactly the opposite. So the more anxious you get the calmer, I'm going to end. It's work. It's work. When I'm dealing with a critic, they want me to fight because they need my anger. They feeding off my anxiety. It's like fuel in their fire, but if I calm

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myself down and stay connected to them, it forces them to either bully me, which some of my critics too, or calm down and actually connect as a human. So I think that's the number one tool.

Greg: I'm just, I'm sitting here thinking about that. I have a situation right now that I've been wrestling through, and honestly, I've been holding off in kind of arrest, dealing with the situation because I'm not ready to be calm in this situation. I'll just feed the, the attacker. Right.

Steve: That's right. Cause chronic anxiety is contagious. So reactivity grows and grows.

Greg: so in that situation, Steve, is it better for us to just own that and say, Hey, look, you know what, I can't deal with this in a healthy way right now, but give me 24 hours or give me a week. Is that inappropriate thing to do

Steve: absolutely typically for a healthy person telling them you're anxious will lower their anxiety. Typically, if you were to say, Hey, I really want to work on this with you, but I need time to calm down. And then I'm looking forward to getting. Your average, healthy person will say, oh, you know what, Greg, I'm glad you said it. Cause I'm not ready either. And then you'll unhealthy person will say, well, no, we need they'll quote Jesus. You know, don't let the sun go down on your anger. But typically reactivity is contagious. And so it does take sometimes like I've had staff members when I've had to come in and meet with them. I remember one guy telling me he's like, I knew there was an issue and every day you waited a got worse for me. Cause I knew you were calming yourself. Well better that, I mean, I hate that he felt bad, but better that than us going in heated. Because chronic anxiety puts you in a false reality, you can no longer hear what the other person's saying, because you're listening to defend instead of listening to learn. So as simple tool, Greg, let's, let's take I to ask you what your situation is, but what you're doing is you're trying to figure out the dynamic between you and the other person, and you actually map it out like a chess. So you would say, okay, I did this and then he did this, and then I did this. You actually mapping out the chess and that'll get you on top of the situation. And then what I typically do is I invite the other person to look at that dynamic with me, but I'm always confessing. I'm never accusing. So when I meet, let's say you and I had a break. If I came, I would say, Hey, Greg, I don't like how I was the last time we talked. I don't feel good about how I came across. What was it like for you? How did you experience me? And I would give you all the power first and you'd say, Steve, like you are combative, you were defensive. And then I'd be like, okay, that's what I, I noticed that. And I'm really sorry. I couldn't manage it in the moment, but I also struggled like you. It felt to me that you had a lot of heat. What was that like for you? And I'm asking you, how did you experience. And now you'll ready to hear how I experienced you, but when not fighting, we have joined forces against the dynamic between us.

Greg: Okay. Let's let's, let's just give this real life 'cause you know, this is how it happens in, in, in every day, the church planners meeting with their management team, the church leaders meeting with their board of elders or whatever governance body they have. And there's already an anxiety level because they're going in and there's something going on in the church that you know, that whatever governing board is, is not happy or there's one person that's not happy about that. How would you prepare yourself before you walk into that?

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Steve: Yeah, I do two things. The first thing I do as much, like what you said with money and stadia as I, say okay Lord you're with me. I'm not alone. It's not all on my shoulders, but also you're with these men and women in this room, these good people who probably drove from work. And I just started to get their church brain on, like, it's not their fault that they haven't thought about it much, you know? But also Lord, you're already at work in that meeting. So when I walk into that room, I'm actually entering a space where you are work. And then the other thing I do is that, that rule number one, what's going on in me. Okay. Here's something about me. When somebody asks me a question about something, I don't know the answer to, I feel stupid. That's not their fault. That's me. So next time, somebody kind of catches me blindsided rather than react and defend. I'm going to say, oh, wait a minute. I'm feeling stupid right now. I can manage. And I can invite them. So the most powerful tool against anxiety is curiosity.

Greg: Yeah. Unpack that for us

Steve: curiosity. So I'm curious, why do I feel stupid? What is it what's wrong that these people ask these random questions? Why is it that when they blindsided me, cause the youth minister has a hole in the wall and I'm somehow in trouble that the meaning I'm making out of that. So, so there's that, but then there's curiosity for the person asking the question. I think we've all had a board where that one board member asks open critical questions that don't really go anywhere. But everyone catches that anxiety because anxiety is contagious. So the most anxious person in the room has the most power. Oftentimes it's the cynical board member chipping away at you. That's turning the whole board. So I try to out that person as quick as possible,

Greg: How do you do that?

Steve: I tend to name it. I name the dynamic, like, okay, what's going on? Here's what goes on is I, I feel like I'm carrying the way to the church. I show up, you guys start thinking about it. And then Jim, like, you start chipping away asking these questions, but honestly, Jim, I don't think you would be able to do it, right? Like, could you cause like, it's easy to ask the question. It's hard to build something. Sometimes there'll be that aggressive. Typically I would have had that conversation, I'll say.

Greg: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm, I'm just thinking about, you know, it, anytime we walk into a room, you, you had mentioned the person who's the most anxious is really controlling the room in meetings that where I respect leaders the most are when, you know, you have a great leader in the room and they are staying, they are managing their anxiety. And as a result, it's almost like the room's conflicted on who should we side with, but in my experience, ultimately, if you have a good board or you're in a good team meeting, then, if you can keep yours down, you're going to gain so much respect and so much leadership credibility rather than going on the offensive and attacking. Not that you don't have to say some hard things sometimes. Right. But,

Steve: but even when you say those hard things, it's for the sake of the other person, it's not a reactive response. It's it's still saying, listen, this is not good for our board. That I spend all this time on the back foot. While you guys ask these open-ended questions, this is not helpful.

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Greg: We need to wrap up here shortly, but I want to pursue this just a little bit farther. So how important is it for us as leaders? You're walking into a meeting with your staff. You're walking into a group of your, you know, high-level volunteers in the church. You're walking into your board, whatever, how important is it for us to walk in with the intention? Of saying I'm going to have my leadership anxiety as under control as I possibly can to set that because so often we as leaders, we walk in there and like we're, people can tell we're a time bomb ready to go off.

Steve: That's right. I think it's more important than the agenda.

Greg: Wow.

Steve: I, I think it's, I think it's the most important. So just as the most anxious person in the room has the most power, the calmest person in the room. Th this is the way of Jesus. You can actually read the gospels through the lens of chronic anxiety because Jesus had calm presence. He used curiosity. He was not afraid to provoke, but it was always for the sake of the Pharisees, as much as he called them whitewashed tombs. By that point, he was, he'd kind of, this is like my final play was you guys to, to wake up. Right. But before then you actually see his interaction with him. He's actually inviting them into the kingdom. It's pretty fascinating so sometimes you do make these bold deliberative moves, but it's always out of love and it's deliberative. It's you're not trying to prove someone wrong. So managing yourself. I mean, this is systems theory 1 0 1. When you get anxious, I calm myself and that'll help calm you. And so working on yourself, walking into the. It's it's the most important thing.

Greg: I that's just gold. Steve cuss author of Managing Leadership Anxiety. If you haven't picked that up, go out and pick it up, order it on zoom. It's one of Howard Stern's favorite books, I'm sure will be calling you to do an interview, Steve. Which would be fun. I'd like to hear you deal with it. Steve, thank you for your time and for your, your leadership in this.

Steve: Ah, thanks, Greg. Yeah, I love what you're doing. Your leadership loves Stadia thanks so much.