

1/27/25

Week five: WFL

Randy Robison and Tammy Trent

Natalie Runion

Studio Discussion:

RANDY: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Randy Robison. This is Tammy Trent. How are you doing?

TAMMY: I'm good!

RANDY: I love my church. We've been blessed to be in some really great churches. How do you like your church?

TAMMY: I love my church. I really, really do. What a blessing to be at a church, which you know, that you love, and that you feel is flourishing. And even though they're probably not doing everything right, at least it feels like they are. I love it!

RANDY: I think that's probably the case for most of you, but definitely not all of you. We're going to talk about some of the issues with the church and maybe how we can approach it and make our church better.

Our guest today is Natalie Runyion. She has a book called *The House That Jesus Built*. Natalie has not always had great experiences in churches. So if you've experienced a little bit of what they call "church hurt," we're going to give you, hopefully, a little bit of encouragement today.

Good to see you again, Natalie. How are you?

NATALIE: I'm well. It is so good to be back with you guys.

RANDY: How is your church these days?

NATALIE: Amazing! Man, we are a part of the most thriving, beautiful, healthy church. It's been a very restorative and redemptive season.

RANDY: That hasn't always been the case. Explain a little bit of why this is an issue for you.

NATALIE: I grew up as a pastor's kid so I saw the underbelly of the beast my entire life. I saw the good, the bad, the brutal, the beautiful, and so I think when you come face to face with the honesty that we are humans in our flesh leading something holy, that is God's, that we're going to be disappointed, we're going to be let down, and many times wounded. For some, so wounded that they haven't been able to heal properly to come back. And for others of us, just kind of constantly wrestling with our relationship with God's people in the church while desperately wanting to cling to the Lord.

TAMMY: Let me start at the top where you talk about the blueprint. How did we get away from the original blueprint?

NATALIE: It is such a slippery slope. We start with good intentions. We want to build our churches just as the early church did. We want to grow, we want to get the gospel out. And then worldly measures start coming in, how much money is coming in? Social media, technology. We start putting pastors on platforms and they start building their own personas and writing books and speaking. And now we have celebrities as pastors, not people who necessarily know or are called to shepherd.

So we just very slowly started fading away from God's original design for the church, which was really to preach the message of Jesus Christ and bring salvation to the lost. That was the original intent.

TAMMY: So what about the churches where you talk about the celebrity or the smoke during worship, all the stuff that's going on? Is there a place for that in the church? What is your

thought when it comes to that?

NATALIE: Well, the disciples and the Apostle Paul, they all knew their culture. They knew their poets, they knew the different political cultures. So the church has always been moving with the current culture, and we have to be aware of our culture. So when we see things like smoke and lights, and certain things like that, we can say, okay, that's a culture. That's something that we're matching the times that we're in. That's something that people value these days; not everyone, but some.

Because we live in America, we have the choice to pretty much go to any church on the corner and pick our adventure. Like do we want to have smoke and lights? Do we want to have an organist? Do we want to have Sunday School? Do we not? So we're blessed here in America to be able to pick and choose what we prefer, which the Acts church, didn't have that luxury. And churches around the world don't have that luxury as well.

RANDY: You're talking about style, and I'm with you, I love that we have different styles because different styles help different people connect. As long as the point is always to connect to God, I think it is a good thing. I think one of our classic mistakes, and I'd love to hear your input on this, is we oftentimes go to a church thinking what am I going to get out of it? As opposed to how am I going to contribute to be a part?

Do some of the problems, and some of the solutions start with us?

NATALIE: Always. Always! It's why we have to pray that prayer, search my heart, O Lord, and find out if there is any wicked way in me. We start with repentance and inspecting the foundations of our own houses before we walk into a church and demand that it is perfect or that it meets all of our criteria. We have become a consumer culture. And I talk about that in the book, how easy it is to Google review a church like we're staying at an airbnb. Well, the coffee wasn't hot. The music was too loud.

But what we're forgetting is that the original church was founded on things like community and

communion and worship and repentance and reconciliation. These are all things that whether you have an organ or you have the biggest, most famous band leading you in worship every week, we can all agree that that original foundation truly was the very fundamental part of our Christianity and it started with Jesus and it ends with Jesus.

TAMMY: Totally. Natalie, there are a couple of things I want to read that stood out to me. It's like I put them on a sticky note. It was a powerful reminder to me every single day. "There is coming a day when it will be very clear who built with Jesus and who built for themselves." "God is patient but is not unaware." That one hit me hard because we're always talking about Jesus is always so patient. But you went on to say, "But God is not unaware." He is so aware.

I want to also say, "God doesn't want a clean house, he wants a holy house." What does that look like?

NATALIE: Well, first of all, we have to stop putting such an emphasis on the gifts that we get as consumers of Christ and start focusing on the fruit that we are producing. How will we know if something is of God? The proof will be in the fruit. And what is that fruit? Well, we read about that in Galatians, it's joy, peace, gentleness, kindness. But then beyond that, its measure is of salvation. Are we bringing the lost to be found? Are we in our cities feeding the homeless? Are we taking care of the widow and the orphan? Are we bringing in those who have been marginalized? That's the fruit that we're looking for.

So when we get to heaven, all these earthly treasures we built up in social media, following, and books that we've written and songs that we've produced, that's all great here but that's not anything we can take into eternity. We can only take each other into eternity.

TAMMY: Exactly right.

RANDY: When you, your point, where you had to make that decision, am I going to be a part of a church or am I going to walk away? What were some of the issues that you ran into? I think a lot of people who are struggling with church can relate to some of the things that you've been

through.

NATALIE: It is just hard to trust again. You want to believe that the house that built us, especially those of us who grew up in church, that we're going to be protected by this institution. That should be the safest place on the planet; the church should be the safest place. And yet, so many people have walked in and they've been rejected. We've been assigning Scarlet letters rather than extending Scarlet ropes.

So people are walking in and they're thinking, am I going to get hurt again? Am I going to be rejected again? Am I going to be marginalized again in the very place where it says all sinners are welcome and everyone is welcome? So I think trust is a huge part. For me, it's even why I get hesitant sometimes to want to join a church staff again. Will I get hurt by another leader or by another pastor?

I also think that we feel a little bit of bait and switch sometimes, in the church community where we're made promises. Like if you do X, Y, and Z then you're going to get this in return. So we serve and we work 50-hour weeks or we show up when nobody else will show up and we're more lonely than ever, we're more discouraged than ever.

A lot of that is because we've attached ourselves to counterfeit connections. Jesus says that he is the vine, we are the branches, and that if we will just remain in him, that he'll remain in us.

But so much of this deconstruction movement and leaving the church I believe has come from where we've attached ourselves to faulty connections, and attached ourselves to people versus remaining in Christ. Because when people fail us, God stays the same.

RANDY: Yeah! That is so true. What do you look for when you walk in a church?

NATALIE: Oh man, I'm looking for people who are happy that I'm there. I'm looking for people who are happy that they're there. I'm watching for joy. I'm watching for community, signs of community. I'm looking for a multi-generational community. I'm looking for multi-ethnic

communities that model my city. It isn't just a vanilla look at what we think the church should be. I want to see all believers. I want it to look like the upper room. And I don't mean tongues of fire flowing. I mean I want to see baptisms, I want to see potlucks, I want to see people breaking bread together, I want to see communion.

I don't need to feel the chills. I don't need to feel emotion but I do want to know that I'm wanted. And that when I walk in, Christ is made known, that he is the first one preaching on that platform. He is the one that's sending us out. And I want the church to be a mission field, not a country club.

So I'm looking for a place that is going out and doing things beyond their Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. I'm watching for us to go to the ends of the earth. I'm looking for a shepherd who preaches the Word of God, Genesis through Revelation. I'm looking for a pastor who is going to preach to me Jesus, not politics. And I'm looking for a church that stewards their finances and honors people's worship. Because when we tithe, we as a church are spending people's worship. So I'm looking for stewardship, I'm looking for accountability for leaders at all levels.

Those are just some things that you can see a little bit in maybe the website but what you're looking for, you have to stay a little bit longer to know if those things are in place.

TAMMY: It sounds like the perfect church. And we know the perfect church does not exist but it sounds like the perfect church and you have to be looking for those things. How do we get there? If a church is saying our leadership is falling apart, we are crumbling, how do they begin to rebuild?

NATALIE: Well, God is doing the holy house cleaning in his church and that is happening supernaturally. We're seeing that through leaders who have made mistakes in the past, those things are starting to come to the surface. God is cleaning house because he loves his people, and he even loves those leaders enough to bring them into correction.

We have to remember as church leaders that we are not to be critics of one another but we are to

be fruit inspectors. And so it is okay for us to look around our organization or the church and say, wait a minute, I see a crack. I don't think it is intentional but somebody could get hurt. How can we begin to seek the Lord to bring restoration to this issue? We cannot be offended when leaders come to us, or when congregants even come to us and say, I'm concerned about (fill in the blank.)

Because not everyone coming in is a critic. They have discernment. They see things that we as leaders don't see because they're in kids' ministry, they're behind the scenes, they're in conversation with people we're not. So we can't have all the suspicion that everyone coming to us is just complaining. We as congregants have to understand that we are not critics of the house but we are to be inspectors, fruit inspectors. And then in truth, humility, and love bring those concerns and say, this is how we can do it better.

RANDY: I had a house, a literal house, where the foundation was shifting. It is Texas, it happens all the time. Everybody around here knows. And we would get cracks. You know there are one or two things you can do with a crack. You can go in and you can just rip it wide open or you can try to fill it and make it better. And of course, you deal with the foundation, obviously.

When you talk about the critics, I have a concern and that's why this topic can be a little dicey for me, even talking about it on television, I don't want to give the impression that we are the police of the church. That we're above human faults. How do we discern things and even point out things without being that critic who is just ripping that crack wide open?

NATALIE: It goes back to, first of all, handling our own cracks because there is something so humbling about the Lord working on you. When people are kind to you, patient with you, when they are modeling that fruit with you when you're living a life that is not healthy at its foundation then God says that we are to give as freely as we have received.

So if we are truly walking in humility with the Lord, our heart is not to go in and rip churches apart. But to say God has been kind to me, God has been gracious to me, and in return, I want to offer that to my brothers and sisters and leaders. And so we go in, and with truth, humility, and

love, we don't go in with a wrecking ball, we go in with a white glove called discernment and we serve. We get our hands dirty. We get into the weeds. We get into conversations. And as we fall in love with God's people, as we begin to see that leadership loves us, they're not perfect but they love us, then my intent is not to tear the house down but to do what you're talking about. Go in and say, hey, I have a solution to this. Can I help fill that crack? Oh no, there is a crack. You need to deal with that.

RANDY: That is so right. Here is a difficult part for me and I'm wondering if you've had to deal with this. I suspect you have, we all do. Sometimes I go to a church and I go, I don't think that's what scripture says. I'm not -- I never went to seminary. I'm not like the chief theologian of the church, I know that. But what do you do when you go in and you go, I just, I think scripturally, it's just off. Do we just walk? Or do we have another responsibility in that case, do you think?

NATALIE: I think this is where the power under the control of meekness comes into play in the church. Because first of all, unlike you and I who may go in and know the Word of God, I think a lot of people don't know the Word of God. They don't even know if they're being taught heresy.

RANDY: That's true. Even some pastors!

NATALIE: Yeah, they don't know. So there is an oblivion of biblical illiteracy that we're dealing with right now because of social media, and things like that. So we have to realize there are very few people who are hearing some things and checking that. So when we do, pastors don't really know what to do with that when they get confronted.

I think of Esther and how she prayed and she fasted before she went to the king. I'm not saying that pastors are kings by any means, but what I'm saying is that there is a time and a place where God gives us both favor and boldness through power under control after we have prayed and fasted over something to say, God, would you have me contend for the culture of this house right now? Or are you going to do that through someone else?

That's hard for a lot of us who are trigger-happy. Because we want to like, that's wrong! You

can't say that. But for me when I've had this happen, and I've had it happen a lot, especially traveling all over the world where I'm like, oh, I think that's off. I go home and I want to write an email, "You've just deceived a lot of people." But what the Lord is teaching me is that with truth, humility, and love we sit in the tension of not being able to fix it. And we ask him, God, in your Holy Spirit will you convict that pastor that he missed that? Then I'm going to study, I'm going to get into my word. I'm going to dissect this 100 different ways to make sure I'm not wrong. And then I'm going to pray and fast for how to move forward. And sometimes the Lord will give me the green light, and other times he says, it is not your battle. So discernment is knowing when to go into the fight and when to sit back and let God fight it. And that just takes time, and honestly, spiritual maturity.

TAMMY: That is good wisdom, right there. Honestly! Because so many of us are quick, Randy, like you said, of --

RANDY: I am. I notice. I notice. I want to say something. My wife is like, "Be quiet. Be quiet."

NATALIE: But it is because you care and I don't want to tell people don't care. That is an honest reaction to be like wow! You're deceiving the sheep. But I am learning that I can bring more chaos with my emotions than if I just let the Holy Spirit be the one to do the convicting and allow him to tell me what to do next.

TAMMY: But the maturity in your relationship with Jesus to say, let me go home, let me sit in this for a bit. Let me pray that the Holy Spirit will do the convicting. I don't have to be the Holy Spirit, let the Holy Spirit do his job. And then let me get into the word and teach me something there and wait for the green light or wait for the red light. You're right. Not everything is our assignment. Not everything we have to have our hands into. But pray over it, completely. Pray over everything.

And I know that God will always have his way. He will send the right people, I think to convict, along with the Holy Spirit. But how has this book changed you? How has it changed your ministry?

NATALIE: It's given me a much more sensitive heart toward pastors, honestly. Because being a pastor's kid you grow up being empathetic to your father. You see what your father goes through. And then you also get a little bit hardened because you see that there are yes, shepherds doing a really good job but then you also see the ones that are struggling or who aren't protecting the sheep the way that they should.

So as I've been traveling with this message, and I'm listening to pastors talking about how hard it is to lead sheep well in a deconstruction movement with everything that we're seeing politically, and the division that's happening within the church, it's given me a tenderness back for the shepherds to understand that rebuilding costs us all something. Because any time in the scriptures that God asks his people to tear down something, and there has been some healthy deconstruction that has needed to happen in the church, where our foundations needed to have a little of a rubblezation, where we tore some things up. But it is hard to rebuild when people are constantly skeptical and waiting for you to fall or to fail.

So this book has given me a tenderness towards shepherds, and also a patience with the sheep. To say that we have been deceived in so many ways through social media, through wolves in sheep's clothing, all of those things and that we are just a bunch of humans trying to carry this perfect gospel. And so if we can just give the same grace that we have received from our Father, then we won't be so quick to be critics. We will be more patient and loving and kind and caring, all that fruit that we've been talking about.

And so I just pray as I travel, Lord, you are so kind. There are more good churches than bad churches. There are more healthy shepherds than unhealthy shepherds. I want to encourage everyone listening that yes, you've probably had a bad experience with one church but for every one that has wounded you there are 100 more willing to help you heal. That is what we're contending for in this book.

RANDY: There is hope. There is always hope. I love it. Okay. There is hope for you in your church. A big part of that is serving the community, serving the people around you, whether

you're in leadership or you're just a member of the church. The idea of getting out there and finding that need and not exploiting it but being part of the solution.

And that goes for not just your local church, not just our country, but around the world. We have an opportunity where there is a great need and I, Tammy, just feel privileged that we can be a part of serving people in those needs. You know what? You can be a part of that too. Watch this and you'll see how.

Transition Roll-in:

ANNOUNCER: Earth is often referred to as the blue planet due to its vast oceans that cover over two-thirds of the globe. Yet, only three percent of the entire earth's water is considered fresh. The scarcity of fresh water is one of the main reasons that women and children in remote areas are forced to collect water from unsafe sources.

JOHN: I'm here in South Sudan where we just got through speaking with a mother named Mary. Mary came from a very distant village to here because of this water source. She considered this a good water source because, in her village, she had no water. What Mary doesn't realize is that this water that is here is actually toxic to her children. And she's lost two children from waterborne illness now. As heartbreaking as it is, this water is better than no water. But this water will kill them. With your help, we can make a difference.

With your help with Water for LIFE, we can assure this village, and villages like what Mary came from, will not have to worry about waterborne illness. They can have fresh clean water through Water for LIFE.

Studio Appeal:

TAMMY: That little guy, Randy! It gives me so much joy because there is so much life in that moment to see that rig going in there, to see that drill going into the ground and knowing that soon after, sometimes it is soon, sometimes I've seen that it's taken days, but eventually, they will

hit fresh clean water. And to know that for the rest of their lives that entire village is going to be thriving and growing, not just being provided water, but truly being provided life in Jesus, knowing that he is their source, that he is the one that brought them that life. We are just ambassadors, and we just get to be a part of it. That's the beauty of it, Randy, is knowing truly, that we all get to be a part of that moment.

RANDY: Could not see the pictures and hear the stories that we hear if we didn't know that we could do something. That poor mother, she found out the hard way that the water wasn't safe. You think we should educate them. Yes, we can and we do. Or maybe they should boil the water, or they should filter the water. They try so many of those things.

Let's just give them clean water. Let's just give them water that they can drink and not have to worry about. We know this works because, over the years, we're getting up close to 9,000 wells now. But this year, right now our goal is 350 wells in 20 nations. We're only going to meet that if people just like you step up and say, yes, I want to be a part of Water for LIFE. I don't want that mother to find out the hard way. I don't want them to go through the trouble of trying to even find something to filter water or to boil water with. It is just so much simpler to go in and say, here's clean drinking water. Be blessed.

You can bless someone today. You can bless many people today. Let me give you the breakdown real quick. The average well costs about \$4800. It varies depending on the location, the soil, and the transportation. There are a lot of factors there but when we look at the whole program and average it out, for \$4800 on average we'll drill a well. That well will last for about 70 years because we do a really good job of it. Not all wells are the same. We put in a quality well that is going to last for basically a generation. We call it a lifetime. And that well will on average service about 1,000 people; people literally come from all over. And I know, Tammy, you've seen -- it becomes a congregation point.

TAMMY: Yes! I've been there! I've been there when the --

RANDY: It is a beautiful thing. We've gone back years later and seen that. But your gift today of

\$48 will provide water for a lifetime for ten people. That's how simple it is. A gift of \$144 will provide that same fresh clean drinking water for 30 people. Some of you can provide a whole well. I've known people who have been able to provide multiple wells.

We're just asking that you do what God puts on your heart. We're asking that you be a part of the solution to a very real problem, but one that we can make a difference. Tammy, I want to see more joy like that little child.

TAMMY: I know! And it is possible. We know it is possible. It is only possible when God's people come together and just start building something together. So this is our chance to build something great for these people for the kingdom of God. So go online, go to your phone, and give the very best gift you can today. Whatever God's laying on your heart, then give.

2025 WFL Cause spot:

Announcer: Every day, thousands of lives are lost to waterborne disease, and nearly half of those are children under the age of five. Through Mission: Water for LIFE you can give mothers hope and children a future as we provide clean, life-giving water for thousands of children and their families before it's too late.

With your gift today, you can help drill and establish 350 water wells this year. Your gift of \$24 will help provide clean water for five children. A gift of \$48 will help provide for ten. And \$144 will help provide life-giving water for 30 people for a lifetime.

With a gift of any amount, we'll send you Dr. Don Colbert's new book Spiritual Health Zone. Discover the key to living in divine health as you find a roadmap to adding joy, peace, and years to your life.

With your gift of \$100 or more, you may request the "He Restores My Soul" candle set. This decorative candle and match set will inspire you to remember the restoring presence of Jesus, the true light of the world.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1200 to help provide water for 250 people for a gift of \$4800 to help sponsor a complete well, and request our new bronze sculpture, "Lion of Judah" inspired by Revelation 5:5.

Please call, write, or make your gift online today!

Studio goodbye:

RANDY: What an opportunity. What a need! But we can be the solution to that need. I hope you'll go online or go to the phone. Make the best gift you can! And then look around you. *The House That Jesus Built* is everywhere and we're a part of it. And that is the book. You can pick up Natalie's book wherever you get books. Natalie, thank you so much!

NATALIE: Thank you for having me.

TAMMY: Loved having you here. It is not just a book for leaders but I think it is a book for every one of us as believers. So thank you for diving in. Thank you for being bold and for speaking into my life and challenging me in my own walk with Jesus.

I hope it was a challenge for you too, today. We're glad you watched and we'll see you next time on *Life Today!*