

Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This is an archived edition when our program was called Leadership Landscape TV.

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Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to a new partnership between Metro T.V. and Y-PAL, the Young Professionals Association of Louisville called Leadership Landscape where we go inside the minds of local community leaders and allow them a chance to offer some keen insights into how they see themselves and most importantly explore just what makes them tick. I am Kirt Jacobs a Y-PAL board member and host of the show. Today our guest is Reverend Bob Russell. For those of you who do not know Bob, allow me to read a bit of his bio for you.

Growing up in Northern Pennsylvania, Bob had intended to become a high school basketball coach. However, he enrolled in the Cincinnati Bible Seminary graduating in 1965. And in 1966 at the tender age of 22 Bob became the pastor of Southeast Christian Church. With a congregation of 120, today Southeast Christian is the largest congregation in the state of Kentucky and one of the top ten largest churches in the United States of America with a weekend attendance exceeding 18,000. Bob is an accomplished author writing over a dozen books and Bob has a weekly column in the Lookout, a nationally syndicated magazine. The list goes on, Bob is heard weekly on the Living Word, a nationally broadcast radio program in 35 stations with some as far away as South America and Europe. A quote he has on leadership is “now it is frightening to be a leader. People take shots at you, people criticize you but if big things are going to happen and important steps are going to be taken in this community in the future.

They’re going to have to be some young people who say I believe God’s tapping me on the shoulder and I believe I’m being called to lead.. Even if nobody’s following because it’s the right thing to do. I just challenge future leaders to have the courage to think big things.”

Recently ranked the most powerful religious leader in Louisville, Bob will officially hand over the reins of Southeast Christian in 2006 to Preaching Associate David Stone. Bob and his wife Judy have been married over 40 years. Have two sons and six grandchildren. Welcome Reverend, our first question today is what drives you to do all of this? It is a phenomenal story.

Bob Russell: That's not an easy question.

Kirt Jacobs: No

Bob Russell: You know there are there are positive motives and then there are motives that are that are negative. I've always been a driven person. I think some of that is temperament and I am an ambitious person. When I was playing ball, I wanted of the be the best that I could be. J. Willis Hamilton an author says that we all have a drum major instinct in us. For some of us, its more instinctive than others and sometimes I'm driven by the fact that I'm a people pleaser and I bend over backwards to please people and that's not a good motive. But I like to feel like that the primary drive in me is that I really believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is absolutely true and the only hope of the world. The basics of the gospel I hold really dear to my heart and you can be driven by the things temporarily but if something's going to drive you over the course of a lifetime it has to be a deep seated conviction and I believe that it's true that we've all sinned and fallen short of God's will and that Jesus Christ came into the world to die for our sins and that we have through acceptance of Jesus Christ we have the forgiveness of sins and we have the promise of eternal life and we have a purpose for living and that I have been called and commissioned by God to share that message as effectively as I possibly can. So the bottom line drive for me is that the conviction of the Gospel being true.

Kirt Jacobs: Thorough answer. Whom do you credit most influential in your life Reverend?

Bob Russell: I wish I could say Kirk that there was one person. I'd like to say this person is the one who influenced me the most if I

can point to one person I would the right answer theologically the say Jesus Christ I think that's true but you're asking for a human answer there I think. And I would say at different stages of my life there have been the Lord has people into my path that have really had a positive influence in my life. I was blessed for example with great parents. Great Christian parents. I was at a basketball game at a young age with my dad and we were watching our high school team play. And Nicky Vanish, our center, with 10 seconds left to go and one point ahead took an underhand shot from the free throw line and my dad stood up so mad. He said Nick you fool and I was devastated. That's the worst word I ever heard my dad said I couldn't believe my dad had called somebody a fool. Now if that's the worst word you've ever heard your dad say you got a pretty special father. And so that's kind of home I grew up in. So my Mom and Dad were a big influence. Obviously my wife has been a big encourager to me but there was a guy in our church when I first came here at age 22 who owned an office supply company here in town. His name was Butch Dabney and he took me under his wing and taught me about the importance of excellence in everything that we do. Encouraged me. Boosted me up when I need to be boosted. Gave me tickets the ball games and really befriended me and he probably influenced me more than anyone else during especially the early period of my ministry.

Kirt Jacobs: Piggy back on that. What was the most defining moment in your life?

Bob Russell: Well there would be several early on. When I when I married my wife that's a really defining moment. When I decided to enter ministry which I all through high school never thought about being a preacher. And when I accepted the job at Southeast Christian Church those are all defining moments in my my life. But there is one incident that happened early in my ministry that I look back on and I think about how much it shaped my life. There was a conflict in our church and there was a disagreement that I and some of the leaders of the church had with an associate minister and I had been really close to this guy and I had failed to confront as a leader the way I should have confronted. I had the belief that if you just let something go long enough it will eventually take care of itself.

And this thing festered and festered. I should have confronted it. And finally by the time I had enough anger in me to confront it. He sensed that there was a alienation in our relationship and with two of us really had a conflict. And it wound up with it becoming public in the church and threatened to split the church. And he wrote a letter to the congregation saying he had a disagreement with me and when he and some of his friends came to church and folded their arms and sat on the front two rows and scowled at me when I preached. And that was the toughest part of leadership for me early on.

That there were people out there who didn't believe in me. People out there who opposed me and I had the opportunity at that time strangely to run because another church came said we'd like for you to be our preacher. And I decided to stay and confront it and that gave me the courage to confront, the courage to deal with criticism, and it really matured me. That was kind of my baptism of fire and from that point on the church unified and we really started to grow but I had to deal with that conflict. That was a defining moment in my life.

Kirt Jacobs: I think you may have touched upon this. If there is one, what is your biggest professional regret. In other words, is there something you would have done differently?

Bob Russell: Yes, there are a lot of things that I would do differently. I guess the one, if I would say one thing that I would do differently, I would emphasize the importance of relationships in building a congregation more than I did. At first when our church exploded in growth and people just came to hear me preach. In a sense, I was satisfied with that that's a that's kind of an ego boost. But it wasn't very long before I began to realize these people get tired of hearing me preach.

What is a novelty at first or interesting at first becomes commonplace later and the church as any organization the strength of it is people getting along with each other. People knowing each other and the sort. Anne Ortlund, in her book *Up with Worship* says that the church shouldn't be a bag of marbles it ought be a bag of

grapes ...you wine meshes in little and bleeds over. And so in recent years we try to emphasize to people, look this is a large body of people but we want you to get into a small group where people know your name and you know their name and they can they can minister to you and you serve one another. The church can't be a pyramid with one guy at the top meeting everybody's needs. It has got to be a circle where we minister to each other and so if I could go back early on I would say OK I want to emphasize getting people into close relationships with each other rather than any kind of identification with me.

Kirt Jacobs: OK And on the flip side of that, what is your biggest professional triumph would you consider.

Bob Russell: Let me preface that

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Bob Russell: If I say anything that I have accomplished has been because of God. Michael Jordan. One of my favorite stories, Michael Jordan scores 69 points in a Bulls game. They blow out the opposition. The last few seconds they put in Johnny Kerr, a little used substitute and Kerr scores two meaningless free throws at the end. And several weeks later a reporter asked Johnny Kerr what was the highlight of his career, he said the night that Michael Jordan I scored 71 points together. Well the Lord and I have built the church but it is really of God. But I guess if I look back on the things that have happened at Southeast Christian Church the one thing that I feel that was really a special accomplishment was uniting people and getting people to buy into it's time for us to relocate again. We had relocated in 1987 and after four years in a new building all the sudden, we are maxed out again.

We are still three million dollars in debt and we found 100 acres of property off Blankenbaker Road where we are right now and to stand up in front the congregation and say we're still three million dollars in debt and the carpet still smells new in this place but we think we ought to think about relocation. we found 100 acres of property and we're going to try to raise 26 million dollars over the

next three years over and above our regular giving and we think we can do this. We think if we're going to keep reaching people for Christ this what the Lord wants us to do. And the congregation voted 94% in favor of that relocation. And you know I say we couldn't get 94 percent to vote for Jesus to come back tomorrow. But 94 percent and then we had a goal of 26 million dollars over three years. That's a lot of money. It was more than doubling our budget and they pledged 31 million dollars and ...

Kirt Jacobs: Wow

Bob Russell: ...for us to be able to put when when we got out there to that new property and we grew like 3000 people that first year I used the slogan I said it's kind of like when you see a turtle on top of a fence post you know that turtle didn't get there by itself. Then we try to give God the credit for that.

Kirt Jacobs: Our next question is, what do you find exciting but I think we've got the answer to that so we're going to cruise through that one. Can you define leadership in one word? In the great lexicon of the English language if there was one word that you could put it on.

Bob Russell: I think the best, the best definition of leadership is influence. Influence. It's not a title. It's not a position. It's influence. An example of that I use sometimes is years ago I would go out to the University of Louisville basketball games and the cheerleaders would get out on the floor and they would try to get people to do the C A R D S cheer.

Kirt Jacobs: Right

Bob Russell: And there was a guy up on the upper level, Rob Hickerson. And he get up and wave his coat and get everybody's attention and here he is on the upper level in the endzone. And he is spelling out CARDS and he gets twice the number of people participating and yelling with him as the cheerleaders who are designated to be the leaders on the floor.

Kirt Jacobs: OK.

Bob Russell: Leadership is influence. I don't know why Rob Hicker-son was able to get people to follow that cheer. But you go to a meeting it's not always the guy with the title. It's not always the guy with the the most longevity. But there's something about character, giftedness, credibility, integrity that people will follow and believe in the person and he will lead them where he thinks they ought to go. But it's it's influence developed over a period of time.

Kirt Jacobs: Last question, I think is probably more appropriate than most of the guests that appear on the show, when the great day comes, how do you want to be remembered.

Bob Russell: Wonderful question.

Kirt Jacobs: We ask all of our guests.

Bob Russell: When the great day comes and then the Bible says it is a point to a man it wants to die and after that the judgment what do I want to be remembered for. I had a funeral last week.

Kirt Jacobs: OK.

Bob Russell: In which the guy I buried was a pharmacist. Arman Fetter was his name.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Bob Russell: ...and he had an inscription on his tombstone Arman Fetter, pillar of the community. PILLER and I thought that was pretty clever. I guess if I could have an inscription on my tombstone it would be he spoke the truth in love.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Bob Russell: That's a phrase out of the Bible. The truth being God's word he spoke the truth in love.

Kirt Jacobs: Think that's a great note to end on Reverend.

Bob Russell: thank you.

Kirt Jacobs: Want to thank you for participating in the Young Professional Association Leadership Landscape. Thank you.

Bob Russell: God bless you Kirt.

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Kirt Jacobs: Thank you for listening to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This episode was archival audio from when we were known as Leadership Landscape TV. If you have any feedback, general comments, or a recommendation for a suitable guest feel free to email me at kirt@moxietalk.com or catch us on Facebook under MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs, or on Twitter under [@kirtjacobs](https://twitter.com/kirtjacobs) or our extensive website at www.moxietalk.com