

Engage360 | Episode 22: Refugee Language Project

- Introduction: Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's Podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Hey everybody, this is Don Payne, your host, and periodically we want to expose you to people in other regions of the country who are engaging the needs of the world in courageous and creative ways. So for a couple of episodes, I'm going to be coming to you from Amarillo, Texas and interacting with some people here who are doing a really remarkable ministry that can be quite instructive for the rest of us. Not many people know where Amarillo is or at least know of it. If you don't, it's a city of just under 200,000 in the Texas panhandle. It's a little bit isolated from a geographical perspective, but I've learned over the past few years that it hosts a really thriving and quite creative ministry community. And one thing that might surprise lots of people is that Amarillo is one of the leading refugee resettlement cities in the state of Texas. In fact though, the larger Metro areas like Dallas and Houston will host more refugees in total net numbers. Amarillo resettles more refugees per capita than any city in the state as far as I understand. And so this week we're going to be talking about engagement with and ministry to refugee communities. And our guest is the founder and director of the Refugee Language Project here in Amarillo. He holds a PhD in linguistics from the University of Cairns in Australia, a certification in English language teaching for adults from the University of Cambridge and served for several years as a translator for Wycliffe Bible Translators in Papua New Guinea. Now I'll ask him to give you more details about that, but I want to welcome Dr. Ryan Pennington to Engage360. Welcome, Ryan.
- Dr. Ryan Pennington: Yeah, thanks Don for having me. I'm excited to be here.
- Dr. Don Payne: First, tell us if you would a bit about your own background and how you got involved in this work.
- Dr. Ryan Pennington: Oh yeah, sure. You know, I, I spent, like you said, I spent nearly 10 years in the country of Papua New Guinea doing linguistic analysis, which would be a precursor to Bible translation among a previously undescribed language that, what I mean to say is they had no alphabet, no grammatical description. So, those were the first steps that needed to be taken, for work with Wycliffe there. And then, you know, just a few years ago, my family and I moved back to the United States and found ourselves in Amarillo, Texas. And, we were wondering, how God might use our skills and experiences. And we were surprised to find the huge number of refugee people, groups and just the huge number of people who have fled other countries and found their home in Amarillo. And so we just thought, certainly there's something that we could do to be engaged with this work here locally.

Dr. Don Payne: How many refugees are, what is the total refugee population here at Amarillo?

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Yeah, I get asked that question a lot and I, I never can give a very confident answer. I'm guessing around 15,000, but, uh, there are always so many coming and going. It's tough to get a good, accurate picture.

Dr. Don Payne: And from about how many countries or people groups?

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Let's say probably mainly five or six countries that have the highest number, Burma being the largest current number, then Somalia being another huge contributor, and then several African countries like Congo, Rwanda, and Sudan, also offering quite a few people.

Dr. Don Payne: So what brings them to Amarillo?

Dr. Ryan Pennington: For many of them, you know, it's a different story depending on which country and even which ethnic group from each country. So for example, the Chin people from Burma are here often, having been persecuted as Christians. And therefore, even though the population of Christianity, the population of Christians in the country of Burma is very low, it's actually the majority of Burmese refugees. So you see that born out among the Chin. But then the Karen people also from Burma are often not here for that reason. Their reasons for being refugee anyway are more political. However, what brings them to Amarillo is low cost of living, as well as a thriving meatpacking industry that hires a lot of immigrants, with almost no English background. And they can start work at \$17 an hour, full medical benefits with no experience working in the United States. So it's a very great first job in the US.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Tell us maybe a little bit more about the refugee community here. Fill in some blanks. More details on that.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Yeah, sure. I'd say the largest current number of refugees, is the Karen with probably 5,000 people. So that is a, a group from the country of Burma or Myanmar some people would call it. So, that's a very large group made up of a lot of Buddhists as well as Christians. The second largest group, I believe, is from Somalia with probably several thousand people and they're more a monocultural though there are different languages represented, it's a simpler picture. In the past we had a lot of refugees here from the countries of Laos and Vietnam. And so those, the restaurants that you see scattered around Amarillo often serve Lao and Thai food. And those are primarily, Lao refugees who still own those businesses to this day. But they, they've been here a long time now since the 90s, and they are, they're thriving. And, by and large, they have been a success story for the city. But now the current influx, being from Burma, Somalia, and also Congo is much different in that we have a lot of people with, coming from countries where we've had civil war and low opportunities for education. And so they really struggle here in the city because they don't

understand a lot of the expectations placed on them from paying attention to the clock. You know, that's an almighty thing in this country.

Dr. Don Payne: Cultural icon.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Exactly. To the need for money, where many of these cultures, for example, from Congo would have been quite happy to trade and barter with produce from their gardens. And here they have to have the almighty dollar that, that, that's a real struggle. And then the second struggle is how to care for their families, their children, because their hopes rest on their children succeeding. And yet they don't really know how to advocate for their children or how to encourage their children as they pursue education here in this country because they themselves were never in a school, for many of them anyway. So bridging that gap between them and local institutions, local businesses, schools, social services is a real challenge.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. So you're a linguist and obviously there are lots of efforts of a civic nature and a religious nature toward refugee communities around the country. Your Refugee Language Project has at least ostensibly a very specific focus. And you come at this as a linguist. Tell us a little bit about that background for you and then how that shaped this project.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Yeah, that's a great question. I, you know, I'm just really, I'm a Christian who moved back to the United States and wanted to serve the nations and the, the experience and skills that God has given me have revolved around language for a long time now. But I'm not someone who is fluent, you know, I get asked the question a lot. How many, okay, you're a linguist. How many languages do you speak? And like most linguists, I don't like that question. I can't answer that question because what does it mean to speak a language? I can't get past the semantics of that question. Maybe I understand the grammar of a dozen languages. But then I can actually speak fluently in, really only a few.

Dr. Don Payne: So you're not one who just naturally picks up languages.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: I'm not at all and I'm certainly no polyglot and I'm someone who forgets languages just as quick as I'll learn them. So if I'm.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: You have no idea how encouraging this is to me.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: I hear that a lot because people think that I, I must be some, someone with the superhuman ability, this innate ability to learn languages. And actually that's not true at all. What makes me unique is that I spend a lot of time with people and yeah, I use language creatively. You know, when even now, when I use Somali, the Somali community in Amarillo thinks that I speak Somali fluently. They talk about me like I am a native Somali person. But in reality I know enough Somali to win hearts. I know enough Somali.

Dr. Don Payne: And to maybe get yourself in trouble from here and there.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: And to get myself in, absolutely. But I know enough Somali to, you know, to get a point across. But I, if I don't study for a few weeks, I forget so much. I mean I have to study for many months I study for an hour a day, just every single day. And I also spend a lot of time with Somali people so that name Refugee Language Project really the, the point was that originally our focus was indeed on helping refugees to learn English because through English they will have access to a lot of the resources that they can only get with that skill. So it is a, it's a skill that they need, that they recognize as lacking. However, in spite of that, I find myself often focusing more on the languages that refugees speak instead of on English. There are a lot of other local programs, churches, Amarillo Community College that, that have good ESL programs and are staffed with a lot of people and have great resources. What refugees often are lacking is an opportunity to practice what they're learning. And I see that a lot. I sit down with a refugee who seems to know no English who spent years in an ESL class and they could not ask for milk at the grocery store if their life depended on it. They would be afraid that the words would come out jumbled, just like what happened for me with all of my Spanish experience. If I was dropped into Mexico, I wouldn't know what I'm doing. But if I built a relationship with someone in Mexico, then all of that innate knowledge would come to the fore over the coming weeks. And I see that with my friends. You know, there's one man I use as an example, often named Biak and he's a Chin pastor here in Amarillo. And when I first met with him, it took me 10 minutes to explain to him that I have younger brothers, he just could not get it. I'm showing him maps and pictures, just the most basic thing I could not get across. And yet now he comes onto my back porch, my house, and we talk for hours about deep issues about how to benefit their community. I have never sat down with him and taught him a grammar lesson or anything like that. I've simply built a relationship with him and allowed him to practice what he's learned elsewhere. So the language focus has been that combined with the kind of personal focus on other languages in order to build trust with different communities. So when I use Somali, it opens up doors of trust with Somali leaders that allows us to meet needs.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. Tell us a little bit about the Language Project itself. How you got that started? What kinds of things do you do? What's the structure of that?

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Yeah, sure. We are kind of, we're, we're a standalone nonprofit at this point. But Redeemer, a Christian Church incubated this project and allowed us to get off the ground, with the idea that we would be neutral. So we don't belong to Redeemer or any church. And our goal has always been to remove language barriers, build leaders, and cultivate community among the refugees in Amarillo, and even surrounding regions. And so that has led us to establish events. We've called them Table Talk. And those, those have been very successful. That's been a weekly program where we've sat down around tables, and shared a meal together. And each week we focused on a particular cultural issue. So for example, one week we focused on leadership and what does it mean to make decisions for your community? You know, in America we think of decisions

being very individualistic. We can make them for ourselves. But, that night we had lots of Somali people and they do not make decisions in the same way, they are group oriented and a decision that they make has to be made with lots of other people. In fact, if you ask them what they like, you might see them look to their left and right to see what other people like because that's what they like too. So we, we introduced the mayor, we had the Mayor, Ginger Nelson come out and speak so they could see an example of leadership. We shared a Somali proverb and then we had conversation questions about leadership and decision making. So volunteers primarily from churches though not again, this isn't a church program. So volunteers from all over the city sat down across the table from our guests and we talked about culture. We're practicing English, but we're getting at the deeper cultural issues and building relationships in the process. So out of that program, a lot of other programs have developed because we've built relationships there. And that has catapulted us into relationships where organically we've heard about needs and been able to address them. Perhaps our biggest impact is through our mentorship program. We call it Face to Face where we pair people one-on-one and we have about 25 of those mentorships happening where a volunteer goes into a refugee's home weekly. And some of those relationships have now lasted for 18 months, two years. And this is just something that isn't usually done. I mean, first of all, refugees almost never get invited into someone's home, never have guests into their home, American guests anyway. And second of all, we are, most Americans are just terrified. And so there are so many good things that come out of these relationships. And not only that these people are speaking English fluently with confidence, not because we're putting grammar teachers into their apartments, but because we're putting people who aren't teachers, people who are equals, people who see their role as a friends more than as teachers.

- Dr. Don Payne: Well, it's far more, it sounds more akin to the way each of us learn our first language. We learn it by exposure and we learn it relationally.
- Dr. Ryan Pennington: Exactly. When I ask refugees, how they learn the languages that they speak, they never say, well, we opened a book, turn to chapter 13, and we use the context of recycling to teach about the future tense. I mean, this is just not that many of them speak multiple languages and they know that from the reality of having to converse with someone that is not like them. And this is actually something we can learn here because we, Americans are not known for their proficiency in other languages. And yet that is a product of how seldom we interact with people from other cultures. It's all fake environments rather than real relationships. And when we get real relationships, necessity demands that we find a way to communicate and creative things happen.
- Dr. Don Payne: Pick up on that theme you mentioned a moment ago about fear and some of the fears you've observed, and how those both can get in the way and how some of those have been transforming even for the people who had the fears.
- Dr. Ryan Pennington: Yeah. Fear is perhaps the biggest hurdle that we have to tackle here in Amarillo. Fear from both sides. So, we have, we have a lot of people in Amarillo who have

grown up very interested in safety because I think we value our families and in this place in particular, which is remote and isolated, I think there's grown up a culture around protecting your family. Which is great and admirable except that it's taken on a life of its own where we need to produce safety for our family in such a way that we will avoid any chance, any risk. And what I see is that that fear of risk impacts real people and real situations. It means that most people are, that the thought of entering a home of someone who doesn't speak English as their first language, that is, that is a mountain to climb for a lot of people. I mean, that is a terrifying thought. I think especially with what you might be hearing from the news in both sides, liberal, conservative, political talking points, use fear to stoke our emotions and we're having a hard time engaging with real people in front of us. But at the same time I see refugees terrified. You know, last year we had a very exciting program at the Somali mosque here in town, where we had a bunch of local leaders, come in and the Somali people, provided a meal for us. We had hundreds of people in the mosque and it was an opportunity to break down barriers, build some relationships. Well, I got up in the front and I shared a Somali proverb, not a proverb, a folk tale about a man named Egal who, is hiking through the desert. And then sees a lion and then hides and cowers throughout the night at that lion. And then when the sun rises in the morning, he realizes that that lion was only a tree. And I'm telling this folk tale using a lot of Somali. And I had later that evening, I had an elderly man approached me and said, that lion, that's white people. That's American people to me. I've been seeing a lion and I thought you were talking directly to me. I have been, I have been seeing a lion when in reality you're just trees. And he was in tears. He said, when he walked into his own mosque, he was shaking at seeing all of these white people in his building. What are they going to do to us? And when we laughed, he's out there in the parking lot, taking selfies with all of our kids. And the impact is hard to, it's hard to know, but someone like that, an elder in their community who has that sort of experience. My hope is that breakdown of fear will translate in other ways. And trickle down in the community.

Dr. Don Payne: If you don't mind, I, I would love to hear you repeat some of the things I heard you say on the *Hey, Amarillo Podcast*, which I listen to regularly. And I heard your story there first and I remember you recounting some of your own experience when you and your wife went to New Guinea and how that then became a sort of platform or framework maybe for how you are able to understand the experiences of the refugee peoples here. Can you recall what I'm talking about?

Dr. Ryan Pennington: I don't remember exactly what story I told, but I do remember the experience. And you know, when my wife and I moved to Papa New Guinea, we began working in a very remote place. We were dropped off by helicopter in a rural environment where there was no running water, no electricity for a very long ways. And we watched that helicopter leave us, our escape plan and we, you know, looked up to a throng, to hundreds of people who speak a language that we don't. And it was very scary. These people were not mean, aggressive, they were gracious, hospitable, but fear was a really big barrier to us. In fact, they

walked us up to our house, a little Bush house, bamboo Bush house, and helped us load the house with all of our gear. And then we went to sleep. Just the experience of being there, put me to sleep for hours and I tell you what, I slept for so long every night and every afternoon for weeks. And there was a sort of depression that formed around that experience because I was afraid to go outside. What are they even saying? Right? And here I am at this point with a Master's Degree in linguistics with more cultural training than 99.9% of the planet. And here I am in a place that's so different and I can't function. So if I was struggling to such an extent then what is a person from Congo who's been a farmer their whole life. And here they are no decision of their own for many of them. They find themselves in Amarillo, Texas. What kind of fear and depression are they experiencing? And the only thing that broke me out of that is that people came into my home and shared with us, sat down in silence. They taught us how to cook on a fire in our living room. They met us where we were at. And then we began to sit on our front porch and people would come and play with us there. And then slowly we would have confidence to walk around the village. By the end of my years there, I could hike from one village to another by myself crossing rivers, barefoot with not a thought in the world. But those early days, those early weeks, it took people coming to me to pull me out. And then as I developed confidence in my own resourcefulness and my own ability to communicate, I found ways to do that. And it set me on a course for success. And so that same, that same model is really what we're enacting here. We're going into that Face to Face program. We're going into their homes in order to draw them out of their homes to help them integrate successfully, and also to help them to see that they don't have to give up who they are to be successful here. I think many champions of this project actually believe that our job is to assimilate people and that's actually really not true because assimilation isn't a positive thing in my mind. By and large, assimilation means that you're really giving up a lot of who you are in order to fit comfortably into the new culture. I'm after integration where you're able to hold tightly and comfortably and confidently not only to who you are, but to a new identity that you're establishing in that new place and both can be true at once and it enables you to code switch back and forth between cultures and languages and raise your family, raise your children to understand your own culture, as well as the new one.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, it's far more synthetic in the sense that it's not binary. You're not having to shut one thing off entirely in order to embrace something else, but you're learning how they can fit together.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: That's right.

Dr. Don Payne: Is that a fair way to say it?

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Yeah, and it's healthy, sustainable way to live because what they've, who they are isn't wrong. The fact that they are a farmer from Congo or owned a gold shop in Iran or owned camels in Somalia or what have you, those parts of their identity, their language, their customs aren't wrong. In fact, I'm often teaching

Christians not to fear the Hijab when I see Somali women wearing their head coverings. Because the way I look at it, these women are being conservative. They're being, they're trying to honor God in the way they know which is to cover their heads. So it's actually the Muslim women in from Somalia who are not covering their heads that often don't fit into their own culture. They've given up part of that and we might feel more comfortable with that, but they're also missing out on an important part of their identity. They've made a choice, but I don't think that there's anything inherently wrong with someone covering their head in order to honor God. In fact, if you can understand why people do what they do, you can translate it and you can relate it. You know, in Papa New Guinea, it was perfectly normal to walk around women completely topless and that was not immodest, but for a woman to show the outline of her thigh, wearing shorts. Okay. It was incredibly immodest. So for them it was shorts. Okay. And yet toplessness was no issue. And so you just see how when you work among many cultures you have to have that awareness. But what's the goal? If the goal is modesty, then that might wear different clothes so to speak, in different cultures.

Dr. Don Payne:

I love the way you have drawn upon your own experience to form that the mode of engagement with the refugee community here, the mode of doing what you do in the language project. Cause there's a whole, there's an ethos to that that I'm picking up on that's really deeper than or kind of between the lines of the specific activities of the project. And I really am resonating with that. And I know, I mean you and I both know there are lots of outreaches, ministries of various sorts to refugee communities around the country. Many of them I suppose very good, probably very effective in their own way, doing a lot of different things. You've interfaced with some of them and I think there are probably multiple efforts here in the city of Amarillo to the refugee community. Yours is one of several. What are some of the observations you've made about, and this might be kind of broad stroking or general in nature, but what are some of the things you observe well-intentioned American Christians doing with refugee communities that are simply backfiring or not working and maybe they don't even know why?

Dr. Ryan Pennington:

Yeah, that's a question I ask a lot. Because I, there is a heart here in this city in particular, unlike any other place I've seen, a heart to serve refugees. And they do it in many creative sacrificial ways over years. I mean, some of the churches in Amarillo have had active like ESL, English as a second language programs geared toward refugees for decades and they're extraordinary and their longstanding efforts to teach English. But what I see sometimes whenever I walk into those walls and, and watch them interact with refugees, I see a lot of customs, American customs that that can be confusing to refugees. One example that I've seen, is the use of like hand gestures leading like choral singing, which is a really important part of worship for many Western Christians. And yet at the same time I also see, I've witnessed people from Africa watching that custom and thinking that that is an incantation, something hearkening back to their, their animism, back home in Africa. And so when I see that, I think, wow, there are many things like this that, that we, where we undermine our

own goals. Maybe we, we communicate one thing and then we do something that communicates the opposite. When we sit down with them. And, you know, I'm a Bible believing Christian and I think back to Acts 15, and I think about the important decision to not require Gentiles to be circumcised. And in that moment, what they were saying is that.

Dr. Don Payne: It was monumental.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: It was monumental. It enabled the church to explode into multiple cultures because suddenly we're saying that the faith in Jesus does not need to be strung up with culture. We don't have to put that baggage on people if they weren't born with it. And then Paul reinforced that again in First Corinthians. And so I feel like we, we do that a lot locally without, without recognizing it. That what we actually, in fact, when I watch ministries, try to share the love of Jesus in local contexts. What I often see is refugees abandoning or rejecting, not the Christian faith, but the American representation of that Christian faith. And so I don't know how often that local ministers, local practitioners recognize that it's that baggage. It's the American baggage. It's the association between Jesus and the American political world that that produces a barrier that people would, they're not opposed necessarily to the actual Gospel of Jesus. They're opposed to what that looks like in our context and often for good reason.

Dr. Don Payne: And so often we're not even able to delineate between what have our overall package of expressions of the Christian faith, our cultural and what are really enduring and central. Gives a very difficult discernment process. So we take it all as a ball of wax. You know, just one glob superimposed that wherever we go.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: And I saw that in Papa New Guinea because the church in the village where we worked had rejected much of their previous their songs and dances and decorations and all of this extraordinary wealth of cultural heritage to replace it all with guitars. You know, leading like worship music, and instead what I wanted for them was for them to maybe rescue some of those cultural objects and histories from what they wanted to disassociate with and then give it new meaning to redeem it and let themselves be themselves with a new nature. And so, I think that's an important distinction to make.

Dr. Don Payne: You've talked quite a bit, Ryan, about engaging the refugee community relationally, building relationships. Can you give us just a little bit more about what that looks like or what that may be anecdotally, what does that look like for you? And others with the project to engage the refugee community relationally, when that is probably awkward, in a lot of ways.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: I think, you know, this is something I've noticed volunteers of mine when they watched me work with refugees over time, they realize that what they think relationships are, aren't, okay. So I give an inordinate amount of time to refugee leaders. And so when I'm talking about relationships, I mean, they have access to me. So I have picked a few people, a few leaders from each of several groups, and I bring them to my home. I introduce them to my kids, we eat meals

together. I tutor them in school and I answer the phone when they call. And, for many of them, I will meet weekly for sometimes several hours, with no agenda whatsoever. So we're talking hundreds of hours over time so that they know me. I'm the same person in every room. You know, they know and they see me and you know, they're, they've become Facebook friends even, right? So they, they find me on social media, they find me in all these different avenues, public, private, and that builds this trust that I am not trying to do something that will hurt them. One thing that's required to build a relationship is to have a role that's understandable in the community. So I think of a lot of people who go overseas, they want to do some work in another country. And maybe they go to Seminary. Okay. And then they go and then and then what? What are they? Does what they are in that context make sense to those people because if not you will lose trust just by doing what you think is right because they don't have a peg to put you on. Right. So in many ways I'm a cultural bridge in the city, but in order to be that cultural bridge, I have to be identified with a role. So I've used that role as ESL teacher. I've done enough teaching and tutoring to be called teacher, so that now all these local communities see me as a teacher, as Dr. Ryan, they just refer to me that way and they know that that's, that's a role that fits. And it allows them to accord respect to me and associate with me the way they associate with teachers back home. But then it gives me a place in their community where they're the right. There are people I can talk to that they know how to connect with me. It also means that I don't just build relationships with anyone. I'm careful because I know that a real relationship takes so much time and energy. There are so many things, personal things that I've wanted to do, maybe a game or something I was planning to do with friends on a Saturday and then it's Friday night and I get a call from a refugee, Hey will you come to my daughter's graduation? And in that moment you see the cost of a relationship and you have to think ahead when you build these, if it's better to make very few deep relationships with the right people than it is to make these shallow relationships, and be known by everyone and then you're not there for any of them. And so in the long haul, if you want to have an impact, I'm really convinced that deep relationships with the few who can then pass trust onto their community is much more effective than the shallow way we generally go about it.

Dr. Don Payne:

That's good. You know, we have listeners, lots of places around the country, some even internationally. And I think what you've got going on here, both with the Refugee Language Project and in Amarillo, is a really great example for people in places outside of the, you know, the major Metro areas, but they still have refugee resettlements there. I suspect, I don't know this, but I suspect that people in a lot of those communities without an established local ministry infrastructure are really at a loss for knowing what to do with the people, the strangers among us, as the prophets would put it, who are right, who are now their neighbors. What would you tell them? What would you suggest to them about, you know, if there's not just some established reputable ministry to kind of hitch their wagon to, where do they start? What do they do?

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Yeah. You know, that's a tough question. I know every context is different, but what I've noticed in this world is that it was important for me early on to begin to build a relationship with the players that are here with the resettlement agencies. You know, even dropping by and bringing cookies to people who work as caseworkers for refugee services of Texas was one way.

Dr. Don Payne: The civic agencies in this case.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Absolutely. To help them see that, that I'm not against them, that I, that I like what they're doing and I know that their job is difficult. So that's one thing. But I think as far as like, as far as the refugee communities are concerned, the most important thing to do would be to make one relationship, find one, and then just pour a lot of time into that one person. And that's what I did. And it has opened a lot of doors. This man, Doctor Salad. I actually, I think I spoke about him in that other interview. I met him by, because I was just driving around Amarillo praying, how can I serve the city? And I found the Somali mosque here. I didn't know that was there. Right. And I walked in and this is the man I met. And I knew in that moment I, I wanted to have a relationship with him. How do I do that? And I thought, well, I thought back to Papa New Guinea and I thought exchange, we need to be able to give and receive. So I asked him for a favor, I said, will you help teach me Somali? Will you teach me some Somali? Like I'll buy you coffee, we can meet at Starbucks. And we started doing that over like once or twice a week for the next few weeks. And then sure enough then came the favor. He asked me, will you tutor my kids to pass their like state testing for school. So I said yes. I started bringing my daughter and we would, I would tutor them and I tutored them for the next few months. Okay. And then he started teaching me more Somali and then I started, then I helped him get a job at the local unit or not a job, helped him apply for an MBA program at the local university. And since that time he has introduced me to dozens of Somali leaders and he can vouch for me because he knows that I'm out for his good. He knows I've been in his home, I've never taken advantage of him. And he understands my heart and my daughters or my daughter and my sons know him. And so he passes that trust on and introduces me to the community and then they in turn, ask for favors and then I get to pick and choose what's needed. And so you see, that was one relationship that turned into a whole host of opportunities to bless the Somali population here. And none of it would've happened if I hadn't had the one deep relationship. I think we always want to just, our Western mindset is just cast the net wide, meet lots of people. And there's something to be said for that. But what it seems like no one is willing to do is put in the time with one or two people that put in it sincerely over time and it will pay off. And it will, it will help you to understand what's actually happening. And you know, you see like refugees come from many countries where they are much more like coconuts. Have you heard that analogy?

Dr. Don Payne: I have not.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: It's the coconut and peach analogy where, and Germany is a good example of people who are like coconuts. But many African countries, many, many places

that are not America are like coconuts and that is, they have a hard external shell. Okay? They don't smile at you while you, when you walk by them on the street, they're cold on the outside, but once you crack that shell, you have access to their entire life, to their entire network. If I need something from London right now, I promise you I could text Salad and he would text immediately a Somali friend in London and get it for me, with no effort whatsoever because I, I have the trust.

Dr. Don Payne: I probably need to meet this guy.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: But I have the trust of his whole - because I'm inside the coconut. The reason that it's a hard shell is because they know they need to protect you. If they let you in, there are a lot of obligations and responsibilities in the shell. It means he can ask me financial questions, how much does your house cost? I'll tell him. There's nothing, there's nothing hidden once you get through the shell, you're in. Americans though are like peaches, soft and fuzzy on the outside. Friendly, but in a fake way. At least that's the way it appears to coconuts because they see, Oh they're so friendly. They're welcoming. Oh they invited me to this. They're smiling. Wow. They really like me. They must, I must already be on in through their shell. And then we hit the pit. Americans have a pit and only a few people have access to that intimate level of knowledge of us who might have, who we might feel comfortable seeing our bedroom, who could ask us a question about finances, who could tell us what we're doing wrong about our parenting? Okay, so we are very warm and fuzzy to a point and then the wall starts, and that wall is further outside for many refugee cultures, that's where that shell is. But once you get through it, then you have a friend for life. So we have to take that that seriously. Because you don't want to get through that shell with too many people, cause you're going to let them down. You're going to misrepresent yourself if you get through that shell and then you abandon them.

Dr. Don Payne: Man, I wish we could talk for an hour an hour more. We've been interacting with Dr. Ryan Pennington, who is the founder and director of Refugee Language Project in Amarillo, Texas. You can visit his website, which is refugeelanguage.org and there you can get all the typical website stuff about the ministry and project, learn a little bit more. See a better picture of Ryan than what I'm going to take for the podcast. But Ryan, thank you very much for your time and for everything you've invested in all we're able to learn from that. I have one utterly unrelated question. Of course everybody's got to have their stupid podcast question, right? I don't, I don't have an eight straight like Jason had with Hey, Amarillo. But you know, lots of folks drive through here on I-40. And you see all the, well, let me back up. What I've learned in, over the last few years here visiting Amarillo is there's a lot of really good food here. That people might not know about. So apart from all the chain restaurants and the signs on I-40, if somebody is driving through Amarillo, they need to stop here. And where do they need to eat? That's off the grid.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Okay. I've got two places for you. Okay. Two current favorites. If you want ethnic food, I would go to Tooms. That's T O O M S and that's on Grand and 24th. It's actually on 24th, so it's just North of I-40 a few blocks, on the far East side of town that is really authentic, great Lao and Thai food and it's cheap, so I mean \$5 and you're out of the door, fantastic food. For something really stylish Western but really good is Yellow City Street Food at like Wolf Flynn I think. And I40, great street tacos, just Yellow City Street Food is a great place to sit down and have a bite.

Dr. Don Payne: I may or may not be there before I leave here on this trip.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Yeah, that's a really, I mean, their chef, uh, he's just fantastic. It's a really good feel good. It's always changing. I can't say enough good about it.

Dr. Don Payne: Good. Good. Well, I'm, I'm on a personal project to eat my way through Amarillo, so.

Dr. Ryan Pennington: Well good luck, you'll be here for a long time.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I hope so, Ryan, thanks again. This has been Engage360. I'm Don Payne. Talk to you again next week.