

Introduction: Welcome to Engage 360, 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 friends, welcome again to Engage 360 from Denver Seminary, I'm Don Payne your host. We are once again, glad that you and grateful that you've taken a bit of time out of your day to spend with us. There are a couple of metaphors I want to offer for our conversation today. One is from the medical arena where in the last few decades, the medical community has, has learned to focus on upstream wellness. We're all grateful for physician surgeons, other healthcare professionals who know how to diagnose prescribe, and in some cases, surgically repair, what breaks down in our bodies, but we're becoming increasingly aware of the, the more behind the scenes work of wellness professionals who help our bodies not break down as much to begin with. Another metaphor would be maybe from the automotive world. We're all grateful for mechanics. We know how to fix our cars when they break down, but the, the hidden work, the behind the scene work of the engineers who designed the cars and even people like the metallurgists who work with the materials they can help make a car that is less prone to break down. And those are two metaphors that lead us into today's discussion about something we're really passionate about here at Denver Seminary, which is mentoring. That often a nondescript or behind the scenes work that makes the big difference downstream. It's that upstream work. And our guest today is an old friend. I am delighted he's here with us because he and I have not seen each other in way too long. Luis Villarreal, Luis, welcome to Engage 360

Luis Villarreal: Pretty darn good to be here today. Thanks for having me on.

Dr. Don Payne: It is such a joy to reconnect with you. And I have to say that when it comes to mentoring, at least in this area I consider you one of the grand poohbahs of this vital ministry. You have done some amazing work and I am eager for our listeners to hear from you on that. Luis is the founder of a mentoring organization. I don't remember when you began this, but Save Our Youth, which is an organization entirely devoted to mentoring at risk youth and Luis transitioned out of that, retired from that about a year ago from directing it but was the face of Save Our Youth here in Denver for how many years?

Luis Villarreal: 25 years. 25 years Don.

Dr. Don Payne: So you started that what, Mid nineties?

Luis Villarreal: Yeah, we started looking at it in 1993 and we kind of got off the ground in 1994. And it was really Don, in response to a lot of violence that was youth violence was going around town. In fact today Mayor Hancock in Denver he says that these days today remind him of 1993, which was known as termed as the summer of violence, kids shooting each other. And it was a terrible time.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. You know, that's on just about everybody's mind these days, both in the US and in other countries, where are things headed? Because things are so precarious with such high stakes and at least politically, I think a lot of us feel like we are faced with bad choices on the menu of, nothing but bad choices on the menu of options in some ways. And, and that ought to get our focus, you know, when one respect that ought to focus our deepest allegiance and our trust on God, who alone can rescue and redeem, but it also reenergizes us, or it should for investment in a different sort of future. And I think that's what you were looking at. How do we do that upstream work with some of these at risk youth to you know, put the things in motion, the things in place for a different kind of future for these kids?

Luis Villarreal: Well, you know, Don we saw the need among kids that we, there was a common theme and it's a common theme among urban kids, which is where we put our time and also suburban kids as well. And it was the whole issue, the theme of disconnection. And so a lot of kids were disconnected from caring adults, you know, broken families or say single moms who were broken themselves and they just wanted attachment to somebody. And then on the other side, you had Christians in churches who would read about the violence, see the violence, and they wanted to know what to do, and they just didn't know how to make that connection. So you have disconnection on one side and the desire to connect on the giving side.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, that's really interesting because if there's any one theme that I pick up on a lot societally today, is that sense of hopelessness because the problems that are screaming in our faces right now, and there are so many of them, as we know, seems so out of scale, that we, and the solutions seem so inaccessible, that we don't know what to do.

Luis Villarreal: Yeah. You know, we found on that, all good things occur in relationship, business, school, you know, your work in the seminary professor and student. But if you have a good relationship, you can be troubled. You can struggle, but that relationship is a vehicle to carry you through to tomorrow. And I always say that hope is the sense of maybe tomorrow will be better than today. And so when you're struggling, when one is struggling, you're going to get, well, you're going to get through interrelationship. Very few people get through it alone. I mean, God made us as social beings.

Dr. Don Payne: Right. Yeah. It's that undercurrent like in a, in a big river that that stabilizes even the top waters, well, what prompted you? I mean, you've given us some of the prompts, I guess, for Save Our Youth, but give us a little bit of your own background and how you came to be involved in this, to begin with.

Luis Villarreal: Well, you know, Don, as I look back, I can see where the Lord was, you know, the Lord creates these little tapestries in our lives. And he takes every experience that we have, and he includes it in this design, that when the time comes, when the hour calls we're ready. And I think that was the case for me. I initially got a call from a good friend, Jim Grote, who was the international,

formally, the international President of Youth for Christ. It was reading about it. And Jim asked me he was old mentor of mine. He said, Luis are you doing anything about gangs? Well, I was a urban Pastor and I got together with, I met with five urban Pastors every week for 15 years before that we just came together to pray, really commiserate cause we were all with struggling people. And I said to Jim, Jim, we're all doing something with kids who are involved in gangs. They're mothers and fathers who were in our church, no concerted larger effort. He says, well, do something if you can, and I will help. And so we investigated it. And then over the course of a year, we assembled about a hundred churches. And we came up with the crazy idea of having these anti gang anti-violence rap concerts by Christian rap artists who are former gang members that gave messages of hope. 5,000 kids in one night, 800 kids came to Christ and it totally shocked me.

I thought there is no way that number one, rap can do anything good. Well, when it's a message of hope it will work and these kids were eager. So but from there we realized, how do we fill this disconnection? Well, in the book of John chapter five verse 19 Jesus, after healing on the Sabbath, they want to murder Jesus and Jesus is his defense was this. He said, listen, I am doing what my father does. A son can only do what he sees his father doing. And so we said, well, kids reflect who they've been connected to and their reflect what, who they've been disconnected from. So we got to fill the gap and you know, the Lord was preparing me for that life's work. I come from a single parent home. My father died when I was young. We were a migrant family traveling the migrant fields from Texas to Colorado, to Wyoming, to Idaho, to Oregon in the Yakima Valley. And so, you know, in some ways, Don, I was custom made to see the need and to be activated for service.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. How did, how does, how did it work? Cause Save Our Youth is still ongoing under a new director now, since you retired. But how does the process work? Cause I, I want listeners not only in this area, but around, around the country, around the world to get a vision for how mentoring of at risk youth can work. How did y'all do it?

Luis Villarreal: Well, first of all, we decided that we had to come up with some kind of a philosophy or some kind of model. So as we thought about it, we thought, okay, kids are struggling emotionally, spiritually, and educationally. So we want to address those three areas, the emotional area, it addressed the question of who am I? You got to know who you are. If you know who you are, you know, what you can do and what you want to do. And then we said, you know, kids have a spiritual need. It addresses the question. So we focus on the spiritual development, emotional development, spiritual development. Spiritual development, addressing the question of who is God. So who am I? And who is God? If God made us, he's our creator. Then he knows the formula for right living. And then we want to do address the question of education, because if you cannot Excel, educationally you're really are limited in your opportunities. So that addressed the question of what am I going to do with my life. So the three questions, who am I, who is God, what am I going to do with my life? We

thought that's the right formula. And so kids though were so eager that we got calls. We received calls every single day and we can't keep up. There was always a waiting list of 80 to a hundred kids.

Dr. Don Payne: Just to connect, connect them with a mentor who would walk them through those three areas?

Luis Villarreal: Right. The three areas. And they really wanted relationship. And you know, Don in this time of race, of discussions of race, race relations, we had black kids, Hispanic kids connected with white, largely white mentors. And it was never an issue. Color was not an issue. Race was not an issue. The issue was, I want to connect with someone emotionally. And so you, you look at it and so you have black kids sometimes Don say my mentor is like my father. And you know, behind the scenes, I'd say, well, wait a minute. What do you mean like your father? He's white, you're black. How can he be like your father? Well, we're not talking color. We're talking emotions. We're talking emotional needs, spiritual need. And so kids call, they have to write an essay. They have to fill an application. Tell me why you want a mentor. If you can't, then when you decide why you need one, call us. And then a mentor has to tell us, well, I didn't want to mentor because via mentor, because there's got to be a good and healthy reasons to want to be a mentor. We do all the background checks. And then we meet with mentors. We meet with kids and then we find the right match and it could take weeks.

It could take two months, but in the end, we match them, and the average mentoring relationship among kids is nine months. Ours is three and a half years, it is amazing. Yeah, kids are hungry and mentors are committed. Again. Like I said earlier, there is mentors, Christian mentors who want to help. In fact, one mentor called me and said, Luis, I want to help you, but I don't know how to get to where you are. And I wanted to tell him, well, get on I25, go North and get off at 23rd Avenue. He says, no, I don't, I don't want a GPS. I don't know how to get through emotionally and spiritually. I'm afraid, but I want to help. And so we're the bridge people, Save Our Youth is the bridge culturally and spiritually and emotionally.

Dr. Don Payne: So from your own background you were, and your pastoral ministry, you were pretty well attuned to the, the culture of at risk youth and the needs there. But once you got involved in this and you, you directed Save Our Youth for 25 years, what did you learn along the way about mentoring, about the kids you were working with?

Luis Villarreal: Well, you know, when a person is needy, they need a solution. When you have a headache, you need a solution, you need an aspirin, you need something and you can do everything it takes. Now in a child's life. If you don't have an adult, you're going to find a solution and tragically, and this is the case with gang kids. They're going to take their, forgive the use of the word. They're going to take their best shot. They're going to look for someone to fill the gap. Oftentimes then it's another youth instead of an adult, because there are no adults

available, but a youth cannot feel the role of an adult that comes with a lot of experiences, adults who've made mistakes. And so when they connect with youth, it's very logical. Gangs are very logical. They're getting someone to fill the emotional need that adults can't fill. And so they find a friend. In fact, Don, you know, if you look at the book of Jephthah in the book of Judges, Chapter 11 Jephthah was a mighty warrior. The Bible says he was a son of a prostitute, and he's basically a gang member. And he gathers around him group. The Bible says group of adventurers, but I say a group of homeboys that could meet his need. And it wasn't, it didn't look good. It didn't look good. He was an angry kid and kids really should be angry.

Dr. Don Payne: And in that story his siblings had him because of his because of his birth circumstance.

Luis Villarreal: Yeah. And his father wasn't a philanderer. And so he had nobody around. So instead of an adult, what does he do? He runs to other youth. And so we try and cut them off at the pass and say, now here's, here's an adult. And they come to us, here's an adult that we want to match you with. And they readily connect Don. They readily connect with an adult regardless of race or color.

Dr. Don Payne: Hey, give us a, give us a good story. I'm sure you've got a million of them from 25 years, but what's a good story that would capture how God used the mentoring through Save Our Youth.

Luis Villarreal: Here's a, here's a good story. We had a 12 year old kid, no 11 year old kid that there's a Catholic inner city school. Sister Jean was running this school. We had a relationship with them. She refers this boy Raul to us and he is 11 years old. He's an only child. Mom and dad worked two jobs. They're very poor. And so he is a he's depressed. And we matched him with a man who was quite mentored, who's an accountant. Well Raul had a g-mail or he had a what do you call it? Anyway, his, his Gmail was a maggotboy666.

Dr. Don Payne: Hmm. Oh, his email. His email address.

Luis Villarreal: Email address. Yeah. Maggotboy666. He was angry. And me like a father, I said, now Raul, you get home. And I was, I was upset when it was, you get home and you get rid of that thing right now. That's not the answer, but that's how he felt. He felt like a maggot. Well, this mentor met with this boy for five, six years, even longer. So Raul graduates from high school and his mentors within the entire time. Well guess what Raul became parents are both uneducated role becomes an accountant. He becomes an accountant. You know, again, we reflect who we've been connected to and a son can only do what he sees his father doing. In some ways the mentor was like a father to him and he became an accountant and Raul is doing great.

Dr. Don Payne: I'll bet that changed that mentor's life as well.

Luis Villarreal: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. And I remember wanting to be tough on this kid. And the mentor would kind of put me in my place. He said, Luis, he comes from a different kind of background. He's struggling. We're going to be fine. We're going to be fine. And we had a role reversal.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. The mentors coaching you, huh?

Luis Villarreal: The mentor is coaching me. And you know, in this kind of work Don, you really got to be open to those role Reversals, kids will teach you things and mentors will teach you things. I remember a mentor, a mentee told me he had done some terrible things and I was up and I met him. We were at a funeral and I kind of confronted him any, any breaks down in tears. And he said, Luis, it's like the words of Paul. He said, Luis, when I was a child, I acted like one. And if I could turn back the pages, it'd be different. But now I'm an adult and I do things differently. And I feel a lot of regret and you know what, I broke down. He breaks down and I break down and I say, you know, something Jose you're exactly right. Forgive me. And so, you got to be humble enough to hear God's voice. Yes, we're the experts, but you know what, God still speaks to people who are quote non-experts because the spirit lives, the spirit speaks through different avenues and different vehicles.

Dr. Don Payne: Here here, you know how you and I connected was over. Well, probably about 20 years ago, maybe. And many people will know that mentoring has been a central part of the curriculum and every degree program at Denver Seminary for over 20 years. And that's not just a sidebar or a box, a bunch of boxes to check. It truly is a central staple item in the curriculum here. And if I can, I guess be a little bit institutionally self-congratulatory, I think we were the first accredited seminary in North America to put mentoring into our curriculum at that level. And in those early years, we were doing these, you'll remember these Luis, these international conferences on mentoring, because you were a plenary speaker for us and did some workshops in those days. Well, anyway, over these two decades, plus that we've had a central emphasis on mentoring here. And I worked with that as you know, for a number of years, one of the recurring thread lines in that process was what mentors would tell us. And I used to hear this every semester, multiple times for years on end. And the mentors would tell us, I don't know, who's getting more out of this. The student or me, because God has used this to profoundly touch and transform my life. And often unexpectedly the mentors would tell us that.

Luis Villarreal: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. I agree.

Dr. Don Payne: So, at you moved away from Save Our Youth turned over leadership of that about a year ago. Right. And are now working with a new ministry. You're just not going to, you're just not going to sit down and rot. Are you?

Luis Villarreal: Well, you know, Don, what I'm doing with this other ministry is basically helping them raise a little bit of money. Cause I know a lot of people and you know, when I say raising money, it sounds like I'm out there asking for a lot of money,

but you know what, in my career in ministry, God gave me, God was very kind to me, but I rarely asked for money. I just shared the need and people always wanted to know how they could help. So we started a ministry about six years ago called the Master's Apprentice, today in college, Don 60% of the students are female and 40% are male, fewer and fewer males are attending college. Well, you know, college is not the end all. However, if you do go to college, you learn navigation skills, you learn knowledge, you gain knowledge so that you can, as I say, navigate the world. And so fewer and fewer young men were going to college. So I was thinking, okay, so what's the other alternative? What can we do? And so the kids that were graduating from our program, our ministry, they would be carpet layers. They clean houses, they clean carpets, shovel snow. It really wasn't the work that could provide for a family. And so we saw more and more young men have children not getting married, even Christian Young men, because it was the implicit message.

If I can't support myself, how am I going to support my family in an official way? So they wouldn't get married. So we thought, okay, what exists out there? So we came up with the idea as we looked around that the trades, the construction trades were a great opportunity, an Avenue where young men and a few young women could build and grow a career. We didn't want to provide jobs. We wanted a career, a track that would take them upward, where they can earn very significant salaries and provide for their families. In our theme was in found in first Thessalonians 4: 11 and 12, it says, make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own businesses, to work with your hands, just as we told you so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. And so we began to attract men. And so today it's a seven week soft skill course. It addresses attitude and ambition, appearance. We talk about credit. We talk about money management. We talk about banking. We talk about construction, math, and the people that we attract are operating at a very low level. They're laborers, they're they clean cars, but within seven weeks, Don and we have retired men, engineers, lawyers, accountants, teachers, to train our young men.

And there's a lot of different facets. I can't tell you what all of the mark is. I'm not in the classroom, but after seven weeks, they will be offered three to five job opportunities in the top level construction, commercial construction companies. And they will start at 32,500 and they will start out as official apprentices. In four years, they will become journeymen and they will earn 60,000. In 10 years, they will be master electricians, masters in HVAC, heating and air, plumbing. And they will earn near 90 to 110,000. So it's now become a career. And we are kind of like the, the well, the construct that the commercial companies absolutely love us. And so we are a bridge to a career in the trades. That's what we do. It is remarkable. Don it's the best idea that God ever gave me. Listen, if you look in the old Testament to the first time, I think, is it isn't in Chronicles the first time that the word filled with the Holy Spirit is used, are with the craftsman at dinner preparing for the temple.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, it's Exodus 31 and you're right. And you're right. That is, I use that as an example in some of my courses that that is, that is the first time in the scriptures. Anybody has said to be filled with the Holy Spirit. And it was the craftsperson's the artisans who were, who were doing the work on the tabernacle in stone wood. And I mean, nobody ever told me in my Christian upbringing that you needed to be filled with the Holy spirit to be a woodworker, but, you know.

Luis Villarreal: Well, Don you know, that's the problem with the trades is that people have a, a negative view of the trades. They look down on the trades, they say it's blue color, but you know, Don, when you invite, when you call an electrician, when you call someone for your heating and air, these guys are trained in electricity, in technology, in computers and heating and thermal air. These guys are brilliant. And I always tell people, have you ever met a dumb tradesman? I never have.

Dr. Don Payne: You know, you're reminding me of a, of a book I've often recommended, not a Christian book called a Shop Class as Soulcraft by Matthew Crawford. Have you seen that?

Luis Villarreal: I think I read that.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Crawford interesting guy. I won't take up much time with his story, but Crawford, as a PhD in political philosophy from the University of Chicago, worked in a Washington DC think tank for a number of months after completing doctoral work. And interestingly found that work very one dimensional and intellectually numbing. He left that went to Richmond, Virginia, and started a motorcycle repair shop and wrote that entire book to show how the trades, not merely a simple manual labor, but the classic trades are far more intellectually well-rounded and intellectually stimulating and intellectually challenging than anything he did in Washington DC think tank.

Luis Villarreal: Yeah, that was an excellent book done. Excellent. And I remember when he was like, what 13, 12. He was in Berkeley and he was just going door to door, looking for something to do. And you know, the thing about the treats to Don is when you and I grew up Don, we had wood class, we had middle-class today those are gone. Kids, boys are not exposed to the trades. Yes. And then like in that story, that boy was attracted to working with his hands. And I think that does come from God.

Dr. Don Payne: Well. And yeah, he actually grew up in a hippie commune in New Mexico, and just had to learn how to do stuff, how to learn how to fix stuff. And all of that combined with a high level of intelligence, prepared him to do something that society really does in some ways, look down on the blue collar trades. And yet those are, there's a reason they're called masters when they really get to the top of those trades. So I am so excited about what you're doing and it's called the Masters Apprentice, correct?

Luis Villarreal: A Master's Apprentice. And Don we are getting college graduates coming to our classes. Why? Because they want to pay off their school loans. Isn't that crazy?

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Amazing. So Luis, how can people who, even if they're not in the Denver area, if they want to learn more about these ministries and think about what God might want to do in their own locations something similar to Save Our Youth or the Master's Apprentice, where do they start?

Luis Villarreal: Well, you know there's always a youth mentoring program in town somewhere. And so, you know, on the East coast, I know there's a, a number of different Christian ministry, youth mentoring programs. And I think if you just Google youth mentoring ministry, you're going to find something also in, in the trades, jobs in the trades or apprenticeships in the trades. They're there, they're available right now, Don 10, this sounds crazy done. It sounds impossible. But 10,000 tradesmen are retiring every single day.

Dr. Don Payne: Oh yeah. The trades are screaming for help.

Luis Villarreal: Yeah. And if a bad recession comes, it really doesn't matter. It's recession proof. When you need a heating guy, you need a heating guy. So you can just Google either those areas, youth mentoring, or the trades apprenticeships in the trades and you'll find it because those are desperate needs to be

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. And people can get information, get ideas from those two websites, Save Our Youths website.

Luis Villarreal: Yeah. Save Our Youths website and the Master's Apprentice.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. You have a website for that as well. So I encourage people to look at those websites, get ideas, talk to people and see where the Lord might use you, you know, in my life, I want to be a welder. I really think I do. If you know, if reincarnation is a real thing, I am going to be a welder.

Luis Villarreal: In three weeks, there's a place in town that's owned by Gary Armstrong who happens to be the chair of the board over at Kohler Christian University. He has a place that sells welding supplies. I'm going to go take a welding class in three weeks, just Saturday class.

Dr. Don Payne: We may need to do that together.

Luis Villarreal: That's right. That's right. No, it's, it's, it's a good, I see why you'd want to be. It's great. It's fun.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Well, this has been a delight. Thank thanks for not only spending time with us, but for the, just the years of investment in, in mentoring these at risk youth whose future would be pretty dim without people to come alongside them and invest in them and love them and believe in them as you've taught

people to do. So, we just want to, on behalf of maybe the church at large, thank you for letting the Lord use you in these ways.

Luis Villarreal: Well, thank you, Don. And, and, and I appreciate the honor, the privilege just to share what I've seen and what I've been able to be a part of. And I appreciate your work done over so many years and your commitment and keeping your hands to the [inaudible]. If you're a good model for many, thank you.

Dr. Don Payne: We want to spread the word about the kind of thing you're doing as widely as we can and let people everywhere they listen to us, learn from you and let the Lord prompt some ideas in their own hearts and minds. This has been Luis Villarreal, founder, director for 25 years of Save Our Youth. Currently directing the Master's Apprentice here in the Denver area. If you ever get a chance to learn more about Luis or interact with him, you will be the better for it. So thanks again for spending time with us. You can always email us at podcastatdenverseminary.edu. As I said, at the outset, we are delighted and really grateful that you would spend some time with us. We want to thank again, everybody on our production staff who makes this happen on a weekly basis and would love to hear from you about how anything on Engage 360 has been of benefit to you. If you listened to us on one of the well known podcast platforms, please take a moment to give us a rating or review there that really be helpful to us, help us get the word out to others as well. So I'm Don Payne, from all of us here at Denver Seminary, thanks again. And we hope to speak with you again next week. Take care.