

Engage360 | Episode 34: Caring for the Homeless During COVID-19

- 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: Hello again from Denver Seminary. My name is Don Payne and it's my privilege to serve as your host for Engage360. And I'm glad to be joined again by our President, Dr. Mark Young, who is serving as our cohost for a number of episodes during this auspicious time in our world history. So Mark, good to see you again.
- Dr. Mark Young: Thanks Don. You too. Thanks for having me and really appreciate your commitment to this podcast.
- Dr. Don Payne: We're having a good time with it though, maybe a good time. It's not the, the best descriptor during the current times, but overall where we're really enjoying doing this. Mark, before we get into our topic and guest for today, would you be willing to give maybe a brief presidential update on things from the Seminary?
- Dr. Mark Young: Glad to do it. Yeah. I think the first thing to say is that the seminary is continuing to offer all of its classes, all the ones that we were offering at the beginning of the semester. We're now completing, we're not having any classes on campus. We were able to make the transition to zoom mediated teaching relatively easily. That's because we'd made large investments in both equipment, technology and training before the pandemic occurred. We've had very few students who've had to drop out or suspend their work. Those who have made that decision typically have had to because of financial issues or because of life-change situations, not because of the move toward technology mediated instruction. So we're really thankful for that. And we're also not having any of our employees come to campus except just a few for occasional essential work that they have to do. And once again, we're so thankful that early we invested in technology that allows us to continue our operations. So in many regards, Don, it's full speed ahead just in a different kind of a mode.
- Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, a different [inaudible].
- Dr. Mark Young: That's right. And then I would also, I'm also very encouraged by the fact, yeah, we've been able to make decisions in a timely manner that have helped our students plan better for the future. So we're postponing our commencement in May that was scheduled for May back to August. That allows students to not make travel arrangements and just take some of the uncertainty off their plate so that we can plan better and they can plan better. I think it's also important to say that our donor community remained committed and involved with us and we're planning to offer a full slate of courses in the summer. Enrollment looks good for the summer. And based on what we're seeing right now, we have strong interest for the fall. So we have a lot to be thankful for and not the least

of which is our staff and faculty who've made this adaptation with a tremendous sense of commitment. And yeah, I'm humbled by their work.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, your comments about technology are apt because this has probably been a good opportunity for many to shift attitudes about technology. You know, classic educators are not always prone to think positively about technologically mediated education. But that now we're really, really grateful for it. Huh?

Dr. Mark Young: That's exactly right. Yeah, and I think there's a stream of thought circulating, not just in higher ed but in business, that suggests because of this kind of pandemic scenario or this scenario we now all have to take a look at what will be the way to do our work after the pandemic. And so it could be that we are gaining an experience and learning that will serve us beautifully moving into the future. Now, don't over interpret what I've just said. I certainly believe we will continue to have classes in person on campus after we are able to do so, but I do believe we're learning a lot and as you said, a lot of our faculty are not only learning how to use technology mediated instruction, but many of them are embracing it. Where as perhaps they may have been hesitant in the past. So for that, I'm very thankful.

Dr. Don Payne: Right, right. Thanks for that. Let's get to our topic for the day. In my lifetime, I don't remember our entire world being joined in focus on a single cause as we're experiencing right now with the Coronavirus. We're under national protocols that extend into every neighborhood and affect even our churches. And the situation seems to change almost by the hour if I'm reading things correctly. As you may have seen here and there on the news, some people on the front lines of this battle, however, have to think about those protocols a bit differently. And so in order to get a better grasp on this situation and to know maybe a little better, how to dial in our own prayers and involvement we wanted to hear from hear more from the front lines and that's why we've invited back to Engage360, the executive director of the Denver Rescue Mission. Brad Meuli. Welcome back. Brad, nice to see you again.

Brad Meuli: Thank you very much. I appreciate you having me.

Dr. Don Payne: Brad many of your listeners may recall was one of our earliest round of guests on Engage360. He was on episode 12, as I recall. If you did not hear that episode, you should do so you can get a little bit better acquainted with Brad there. I will mention again here though that Brad also serves as the chair of the board of trustees at Denver Seminary and we are exceptionally grateful for that. Clearly he does not have enough to do these days.

Brad Meuli: It's, it really is my honor to be able to do this. And I've had the opportunity to come alongside to watch this seminary through this challenging time and so appreciate Dr. Mark Young's leadership and really just the outstanding leadership of our faculty and staff that I think as they continue to be committed to providing seminary education to students so that they can share Christ across

the world. And so it's really exciting to me to see the way we've had to be flexible at the Denver Seminary and the outstanding job they've done.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, thanks for that. We're equally impressed and admiring of the work you and your staff are doing at the Denver rescue mission and really want to probe into that because you have been in the local media a fair bit lately. I know that you are in contact with city officials on a daily basis. So you're probably our best Intel here for what's going on in the space. Can you give us a sense, Brad, of how the Coronavirus overall has affected operations at the Denver Rescue Mission?

Brad Meuli: Well, sure. This this is our fifth week involved with this. And what's different about a shelter, like the Denver Rescue Mission is a while the rest of the world has been socially distancing. Really, the Denver Rescue Mission has not been able to do that until just really a couple of days ago. And so you know shelters typically try to put as many people as they can in because they don't want people to freeze to death to go hungry. And so this has been a real struggle for us. And yes, there is. There's been a real concerted effort by all the shelter providers where we work closely with Catholic charities and St. Francis, which is a day center, and Volunteers of America and Urban Peak and Gathering Place and Dolores Project, as well as the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless. We're on a call daily with that group. A group from they call the EOC, which is the Emergency Office. I can never remember what the C stands for, but it's basically made up of the mayor staff and Denver Department of Human Services Denver Department of Health, you know all coming together to talk usually for an hour, sometimes a couple of hours a day and say, okay, what's our next move? What should we be doing?

And Don, you're right, it has been, it has just been changing almost hourly, you know, the things that that we've had to do. And so the Denver Rescue Mission very early in the process realized we had to cut back on some of the other things that we do. Our family rescue ministry, our refugee program, and really focus on the shelter and our Lauren street facility. Actually two shelters in our Lauren Street Facility, which is where people come in, you know, during the daytime to be able to get something to eat and to be able to be in our courtyard. The very hard part of this is I've had to send our staff, men and women into this fire that's, which is what we call it, without the benefit of social distancing. And until very recently, without the benefit of any mass or any PE stuff. And so it's really been a great struggle. The good news is that we've only had two people that are outside guests show up with COVID-19 and at this point, only one staff member.

Dr. Don Payne: Pretty remarkable for the number of cases.

Brad Meuli: It's a blessing. I mean, it's honestly, it's really a miracle. And so that's so we just kind of all hands on deck bringing everyone together, trying to figure out how we continue to keep some thousand plus people that we work with on a daily basis alive and try to continue to help them. And they're fearful as well.

Dr. Don Payne: I hope the numbers changed. You did mention a thousand plus. What does that represent in terms of increase?

Brad Meuli: Yeah. Well here's what's been happening. And this is where it's really concerning and is the library closed and the library has, in most cities has become a de facto day center for homeless people. So we closed in, those people had nowhere to go. And then, you know, the McDonald's closed in like a couple of other shelters closed and all of a sudden we're just feeling more and more pressure inside our Lauren Street Community Center with a number of people. So folks that used to eat breakfast and then go to different places or different day centers, maybe go to the library. We're just staying in place. And so we have a place that at Lauren Street Community Center that will feed about 325 people and we had 600 people inside there, you know, and winning climate weather, you know, that didn't want to go anywhere. And so we worked with the city, the city opened up another rec center. St. Francis was able to open up kind of a community center close by. And so we worked very closely to try to disperse folks. But just last night we were able to work closely with the city to get the National Western opened up. And this will allow for the first time in the last five weeks that this pandemic's been going on, will allow us to be able to socially distance people.

Each person has about 60 square feet and listen, I know that doesn't sound like much, but it's a lot when it comes to a pandemic. But when your life comes down to having a cot and a small chair, and 60 feet, you know, it's pretty hard. So but the, we're in 155,000 square foot place of the National Western. And last night I think we had about 650 people 650 men, this is a men's facility. And so they can, it's 24, seven now, so they can stay there, but then they get three meals a day and we're trying to connect them. They come through a medical screening and The South Street medical clinic provides, and they determine whether or not they might need to go to another transitional place or if they need to go right to the hospital to be checked. And so we haven't had that before. We always had to send them somewhere to assessor medical clinic. And so that's, that's also been a wonderful thing. So we're hoping now that the social distancing, having the medical team right on site will really help us to, you know, slow all this and, we're very nervous about it. You know, spreading among people that are homeless because they tend to be more vulnerable. They tend to be like the 65 year olds who everyone has talked about being more vulnerable to COVID-19.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Mark, I'm curious your take on this, your questions for.

Dr. Mark Young: Brad, it's really interesting to hear you talk about the different agencies that are involved some of which are nonprofits church-related or ministry related, but yet also governmental participation. I, my sense is that most of the direct services provided for homeless people are provided by nonprofit organizations and that the governmental agencies play a support role. Is that, is that true?

Brad Meuli: I would say that is really true. Yes. And so they come the really the city comes alongside most of the nonprofit aid. That's true.

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. And you know, it's interesting. Yesterday we were doing a webinar talking about the state of the world, especially when a pandemic arises and how that creates a sense of vulnerability. And it says, you know, that the world really isn't what it ought to be. One of the points that we made that was brought up yesterday is the simple fact that because God's people are on the earth, things aren't as bad as they could be. In fact, the church plays a role in restraining the tragic consequences of the fall and evil. I see you guys doing that, in a very tangible way. You're providing something for these folks that certainly no for-profit entity would do. There's no profit to be made. And that in some places government has not been able to provide. You guys are standing there as the community, as followers of Jesus, providing something for a population that simply would be forgotten by the broader society and in many others.

Brad Meuli: You know, Mark, this is what Christians have done throughout the years. And I, you know, I was sharing with a group of Pastors just yesterday at the National Western. They came to see what we were doing and I said, it's, it has been the Christians. I, you know, that have stepped forward during the epidemics. And it's because of the Christian step forward that a Roman emperor became a Christian, you know, as the Roman families were just pushing the sick out into the streets, and it was the Christians that came over alongside of them and lifted them up. And so this is what we do. And I tell my staff, look, first of all, I know that God's in control of this. He knew all of this was going to happen before it ever did happen. And he is in control and we can really trust that he's in control as well. This is an opportunity for us as Christians to shine in a way that as Don said, I can never remember a time like this, you know? And so that's, that's really what we're trying to do. I think it's interesting you mentioned your, the webinar that you guys did. And I've heard Bob Cotilla talk about this and I love what he said. How people react either with love and faithfulness or they act with fear and self-preservation. Been surprising to me to see some of these great Christian brothers and sisters react more with fear and self-preservation. You know, at the same time, there's been people on the side that are so unselfish. You know, I tell people that you know Christ came so that we no longer have the fear of death, you know, and this enables us to think about others to want to be able to lift up other people and to be able to help them. And so this is our time. This really is our time. And that part of it is really exciting.

Dr. Don Payne: Brad, you're reminding me of something that we heard from our episode of last week when Mark and I interviewed our graduate Drew Yancy and we had a great discussion about some of the economic and work-related impact that we might anticipate. And Drew used a phrase from the business world that I'm still mulling on and called it system shock. Where, you know, every so often something comes through that sort of jars any system to its core and nothing is ever the same afterward. And when you talk about the many sectors of the world not being prone to or not being equipped to respond to something like

this, but this is what the church does, it makes me wonder also whether the church in its various manifestations will be undergoing a system shock. So we're having to rethink ministry in some way. And there is some of that fear that you talked about, is probably running through some corridors of the church and Christians and feeling like, Oh, our ministries are going to be curtailed or we know what's going to happen to our ministry because of all this? And where's our funding going to come from? And I'm wondering whether we ought to be thinking in terms of crisis creating ministry rather than curtailing ministry. And so I'm really, really curious to hear from you on how you sense this is going to expand the ministry, how's this going to be a system shock that will enhance or expand or deepen our approach to ministry, both in what you're doing, but maybe throughout the church.

Brad Meuli:

Yeah. You know, Don, that's a great question. I know that we're going to be different on the other end of this than we were going into it. I absolutely know that. And you can see I mean, just with Denver Seminar, the way that they're providing education, we're moving to more online classes and just like Mark said, it's not like we won't have in classroom classes anymore, but wow, did that accelerate, you know, and these calls. When I when I talk about meeting with all these people, everything's on zoom now, you know or some variation of zoom. And so, you know, talking to, I'm sure the ministry will change, and it's so interesting. It's hard for me to really think much out into the future. You know, we're right now planning through April and we're preparing for, you know, May and into June as well. And I can't really think much further than that. I do want to comment though, you talked about this shock to the systems. This is really an interesting thing. When this first came up all 65 year olds and older I sent home, or they're still being paid by the Denver Rescue Mission, but we sent them home and then we looked at folks that had various health issues or were taking care of perhaps an elderly parent or someone that had auto immune deficiencies. And so there were some other people we sent home. And so we went out into the marketplace and here's how ministry changes, I think in a powerful way. And you can see the system that he was talking about. I went out and asked to see if I could find 35 people to come and work at the Denver Rescue Mission.

Now typically we have a statement of faith. We have ministry principles and we waived all that. And I said, I need some people to come. And you have to understand where a Christian organization and you have to be willing to come and not fight against us as we share our faith with people. But I'm not asking them to share a faith they don't have. And so I had 300 applicants, you know, these are bartenders, these are restaurant people, waiters and all that sort of thing. People that had lost their jobs and they entered into the fight with us as they were trying to make mortgage payments. They're trying to make rent payments, they're trying to take care of their family. And I remember the first four that came and we did an orientation and I went in there and I just, I went in there to thank them and I said, you're coming into the fire. You know, and this impacted me so much. One of the guys turned to me and he said, Brad, thank you for giving me a job. Tough job. A job that other people don't want to do.

This guy wasn't even, this guy, wasn't even a Christian. He's just trying to make it and what an opportunity to be able to share the love of Jesus, you know, with this guy as he works with us. I mean, there's this story after story like that of just these opportunities. I'm sorry. I get very, very passionate about this because I have 240 people. That as far as I'm concerned, are just in the middle of the fire doing incredible work.

Dr. Mark Young:

Yes. I think your passion is contagious Brad, and that's why you have people who are willing to step into that fire. That's good leadership because of your commitment to what you're doing. You communicate that to others. Those are the kinds of leaders that are able to lead people into the fire. It's also, I think I also want to compliment your leadership and being someone who builds allies instead of making enemies. In other words, you've been willing to work across denominational lines with other Christian groups. You're able to work with government entities, people involved in politics, different sides of the aisle. I think when we have a crisis, we find out who are those leaders who've been making allies to meet needs and who are those leaders who've been making enemies in order to win political points? You're clearly the first category and because of that you've been able to lead a charge into a population. Doing things that are truly sacrificial and dangerous. I want to compliment you on that.

Brad Meuli:

Oh, well thank you so much, Mark. We all have the same goal and that's, everyone wants to help people. You know, we believe by sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with people, that it's all about eternity. You know, it's not just this time here. And so but there it's a delicate balance, but you know, we honestly, we all have the same goal and to help homeless, vulnerable, poor people. And Oh my goodness, how Jesus loved the poor.

Dr. Don Payne:

Brad, how's the rest of your staff doing those who are still hanging in there with you? And I assume now from your earlier comment, you've been able to mask and glove most everybody, but how are they holding up under the pressure of all this?

Brad Meuli:

You know what, good. I think they're very excited that we're out at the National Western and that we're able to kind of bring everyone together. We were operating three different shelters and so that and we were busing people, which made it much more difficult. And so but this is, that's the world we lived in prior to this. And so the National Western is a temporary thing. I don't know if it'll go through April or if it'll go through May, but I feel like, you know my staff is really hanging in there, you know, but we talk a lot about the fact this is a marathon and not a sprint. And although I feel like we've been sprinting for five weeks, and so I'm very humbled to be working alongside of these people and most of them, the reason I think, and I appreciate what Mark said about my leadership, I appreciate that so much, but these are folks that know and love the Lord, you know, and they are, they're willing to overcome their fears and to go and be in the fire because, you know, they believe people matter. And you know, the thousand plus people that we're serving you know, they want to love up on them in the name of Jesus. It's pretty powerful to work.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah it is, you know, at times like this will always seem to bring certain aspects of our theology into focus. They seem to force us to think more deeply or think more clearly about God, about God's ways, what it means to love and trust God, what it means to be involved in the mission of God. We'd love to hear your thoughts on that. How, and of course, I know that you're right now you're probably just trying to remember what's the next thing I have to do. If you have the bandwidth to reflect on that. Though that that may be a longer term question, but it's just initial reflections on how is this, what's this bringing to the surface in terms of?

Brad Meuli: I'll tell you one thing that I really there's been a lot of blessings in this. One thing that I really do appreciate is that I've learned that I'm not in control. You know, listen and we try to be in control. You know, for instance, we take really good set of care of ourselves, we exercise, we're eating right, and you still have a heart attack, you know, and even though you may have done those things. And so I think realizing that God is in control, you know, we're not, is just, is really, really important. And I think what we've learned to be is more flexible. And I'm sure the Denver Seminary feels the same way. Wow. We have to flex. Mark was already leading that charge, I think with a lot of our online classes and fully online Mdiv and, you know and, and think, praise God that Mark was here doing that. And you know, and the faculty wanted to do that as well because it really prepared us for what's coming. Let me just say one thing about leadership and this probably best sums up kind of my philosophy. I have staff member that I was meeting with one day for lunch with waiting for someone to come. And he goes, Brad, I know that you were a Marine Corps officer. He goes, I know that you have an MA and leadership from Denver Seminary. And he said, and you're leading as a CEO of the Denver Rescue Mission, could you give me just one leadership thing that I could take away with all your wisdom, which was kind of funny that he said wisdom, but I appreciated it. And so he goes, well, what would it be? And I thought for a minute, and I said, you know what? God's in control. I'm not. And he said, that's it. You know what, that is it. You do the very best that you can, you know and you, you try to walk with the Lord and look for his wisdom and his guidance. But in the end, it's all under God's control. And the sooner that, you know, for me is just giving that to him and going, Lord, I know, I know that you're in control and I'm just going to trust you. And so, and frankly, that's what we try to do here at the Denver Rescue Mission too.

Dr. Don Payne: You know, that's, it's great to hear you say that because that at one level, any, I suppose any biblically oriented thinking engaged Christian would say that. Right? So we know that, but we really don't until that's tested at a deep level and then we learn it at a whole new depth of understanding. So we mean a lot more by that when we say it during times like this. Any big surprises you've had in all of this?

Brad Meuli: Well, one of the things Mark talked about is I, I don't know if this is such a surprise, but an encouragement and that is the way people have banded together. And Mark mentioned it and yeah. Not denominational or whether you're, you know, you're not even a Christian organization, city government.

Everyone has come together, you know? And so there, there is always some politics still, but there's not as much because people's lives really are at stake. And so, that's really an encouragement to me. I've been surprised sometimes by and maybe I shouldn't have been by, you know, people's fear, you know some, you know, great Christian men and women that I've known that this is, you know, it's really, really rocked them and they've been very fearful. And so and you know what? It's okay. I tell them, look, it's okay to be afraid. I'm afraid. It's what you do with that fear, you know and how you live with it and how you try to give it to God and trying to hang in there then I think is the most important thing.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Good word. Mark, your closing thoughts.

Dr. Mark Young: I was going to ask Brad this question. Brad, if there are folks who hear this podcast and they want to help in what you're doing, what are some ways that listeners could engage with you? How could they make gifts to help you and how could they volunteer if that's still a part of your profile?

Brad Meuli: Sure. Well, thank you so much Mark. Well, we always appreciate financial gifts through DenverRescueMission.org. You can go there if you're under sixty years old and you feel like you would like to volunteer to help us serve meals. I just served a meal this morning because we've just gotten this a new supplemental shelter up at the National Western, but you can go to Denverrescuemission.org and check on our volunteer button and we're serving that. We need 10 people at breakfast, lunch and dinner at the National Western to come and serve a meal, and you need to bring a mask, you know and basically you're kind of behind the line serving meals. But that's a real need that we have. And when you look across that and you see people and they're so thankful that you're there, that you're providing them a meal, it's incredibly moving. Not everyone can volunteer. And I understand that for a variety of reasons. But if you're able, you know, we're an essential business and our volunteers are essential and this is a great surprise to me as well done is, and it shouldn't have been, but volunteers continue to come. They can continue to come. The body of Christ just continues to come and serve right alongside of us. And it is overwhelming.

Dr. Don Payne: Here, here.

Dr. Mark Young: Thanks be to God.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Brad. Thanks. Thanks so much for carving out some time to chat with us and much more deeply for all that you're doing in the name of our Lord to house and feed and care for people. It's always a risk, but now at even greater risk and greater costs.

Brad Meuli: So, well, Don and thank you. And I just want you to know that my time at Denver Seminary, working on this MA leadership really helped prepare me for this day for such a time as this.

Dr. Don Payne:

That's good to hear. Good to hear. We have been interacting with Brad Meuli who's the executive director of the Denver Rescue Mission and a man right on the front lines with the Coronavirus and all of its impact here in the front range of Colorado. And we're very grateful for him and for his service and his friendship and grateful for all of you who carve out a little bit of time either periodically or hopefully weekly to let us try to build into your life through Engage360. We would love to hear from you if you have thoughts or comments or suggestions or reviews or anything. You can email us podcast@denverseminary.edu, is our email address, but for my cohost, Dr. Mark Young and for our production team, and everybody here at Denver Seminary, thanks for letting us take a little bit of your time. And may the Lord keep you and preserve you. Stay wise, stay safe, stay healthy, but stay engaged. Talk to you soon.