

Engage360 | Episode 35: Church-Planting in Changing Times

- 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: Well, hello again from Denver Seminary. This is Engage360. And I'm your host, Don Payne, joined by our cohost for some of these episodes, our President, Dr. Mark Young. Hi Mark.
- Dr. Mark Young: Hey Don, great to be with you again. As always.
- Dr. Don Payne: Well, we've got another really interesting episode and guest with us today. Let me set it up this way. It was in 1844 that a young man, 22 years old named George Williams, had moved from his farm in England to the city of London and was working retail. And as he got acquainted with and got acclimated to London life and that post industrial revolution time period, he was overwhelmed by the sheer, not only the sheer numbers of people, but by the destitute conditions that he saw in London in that time period. And many of the young men who liked him had come from the farm to find jobs in the city were getting into all sorts of trouble and the social conditions of that day. And so 22 year old George Williams decided to do something about that and started a society for young men to get them off the streets. And that is today what we know is the YMCA, the Young Men's Christian Association. And if you scroll forward, about 20 years to 1865, there was a young married couple, they were in their mid thirties likewise in London, still sort of in the wake of the really horrible social conditions that were left by or as a byproduct of the industrial revolution. And this young couple decided to make a very unconventional move of taking ministry to the streets, to help the folks who were in such dire straits. And interestingly many of the conventional church leaders of the day leveled severe criticism at them for their unconventional methods. But William and Catherine Booth persevered and decided to form what we now know as the Salvation Army which has ministry even today in over a hundred countries. Now I tell you those stories because that both of them illustrate in various ways how crisis creates ministry. And our guest today this week is one of our soon to be graduating Master of Divinity students. Danielle Reeves, welcome Danielle to Engage360.
- Danielle Reeves: Thanks. Thanks for having me.
- Dr. Don Payne: We're glad you could be here. And we've asked Danielle to interact with us this week because she has a pretty rich ministry leadership history, which I wanted to tell you about and is also on a ministry trajectory of church planting, which we're really excited about, but has also taken some turns in the road for reasons that you could guess given the current pandemic that is holding our world by the throat so to speak. Danielle introduce yourself if you would, and tell us a

little bit more about your personal journey, your ministry journey, including what led you to Seminary and what led you to plant a church?

Danielle Reeves:

Yeah, absolutely. Well, thanks again for having me. Nice to be with you both. You know, I'm going to go back a ways just to give you some background because it plays into, to my story and how I got here, but I did not grow up in the church. But one of the things that my parents taught us from a very young age is the value of caring for others and serving others. And so I grew up with that passion, came to Christ in high school through Young Life and all of a sudden something that had been kind of this practice that we did as a family became this conviction and a part of my faith. That eventually took me to Azusa Pacific University where I got my degree in elementary education. And then I ended up in inner city Philadelphia working with Tony Campolo and Bart Campolo's urban ministries and got to live on the streets of Philadelphia in a storefront and serve the families that were there. And through that process I really realized just the fact that I had this deep, deep love that was continuing to grow for serving others. After that moved back to Colorado, this is where I grew up. My husband and I ended up getting married after moving back here and I started teaching in a school in Aurora with kids that were in pretty similar backgrounds to the ones that I worked with in Philadelphia.

So just this continued theme of serving others. Not long after about two years after I started teaching, we got pregnant with our first child. His name's Aiden. And right after Aiden was born, everything seemed very normal. Seemed like a healthy birth. And we found out soon after that he had a life threatening heart defect called hypoplastic left heart syndrome. And three days later he passed away and it changed everything. It took me from this place of being on the giving side of service to being on the receiving side of service, to being the one who wasn't poor monetarily, but who was very poor spiritually and emotionally, and physically at times. And so I went through this long season, about a year where I just really wrestled with God, wrestled with lots of questions of why, why would he impact me that way? Why would he give us baby for three days only to take him away? And about a year into that, ironically it was this week, it was Holy week right before Easter, I remember driving down the road and saying, God, you have said that you won't give us more than we can handle. And you've said that you understand what it's like to be us, but you don't know what it's like to be me. You don't know what it's like to lose a son. And it got very quiet in my car.

But it was this sense of this compassionate presence of the creator and this sense of, I haven't left you and I do know, and I'm here with you. And there was something in that moment that became an invitation to me to sit with people in the midst of their hard, which then launched me into years of a whole different kind of ministry. At the time we had started at Waterstone Community Church that's been our home church for 25 years. It is an amazing place. And I just began to get involved in different things. I ran mothers of preschoolers for a number of years. I started the preschool at Waterstone. I got to be the outreach Pastor and then got to mobilize people into service. And at some point I went

back to school in Philadelphia, got my degree in organizational leadership, my Master's of Arts, and really began to hone in on developing people. And my role at Waterstone shifted and that was my job. I got to disciple and lead a number of our staff. And about three years ago something in me started churning. I, something was wrestling. I was having a wrestling with God and just sensed this invitation to go to Seminary. And I thought that was crazy. I had just finished a degree seven years before and wasn't necessarily looking for another one. But I couldn't get it to go away. And so after a lot of discernment, and asking wise people, ended up enrolling, knew that I wanted to get my Masters of Divinity. And really anticipated that that would just give me more insights into how to serve people and care for people and be a part of the church.

Well, much to my surprise, about a year ago another wrestling began and I started to sense this invitation into leading a church. Specifically leading a church plant. And there aren't a ton of females out there to call and ask what that journey is like. But again, I got some really wise counsel, did a lot of discerning, got to work with a group called Stadia, that's an international church planting group. And they do it an intensive assessment process. And at the end of that, just got this affirmation that, yeah, we think you're wired to plant a church. And so last October I stepped out of my role at Waterstone. They have been incredible partners and are helping launch me into this new adventure. And yeah, I am a church planter. I'm in prelaunch phase. We're going to plant in Lakewood, Colorado this fall. And it has been an amazing journey.

Dr. Mark Young:

I love hearing stories of how God weaves together different parts of a person's life to bring them to these moments of decision. Could you just reflect on how the different involvements you've had are all coming together for you in this church planning experience? What have you taken from each that makes church planning such so natural for you at this point?

Danielle Reeves:

Yeah. I think there's a couple things. Well, a number of things. One is that just going back to that idea that we're all at some point on the giving side of offering a hand and we're all at times on the receiving side of offering a hand, it really evens the playing field. And so I think as a church planter, that invitation that we're all in this together it's not a better or a worse or a have or a have not. It's that we are all children of God who've been invited into this family together. I think the experience and the time with the organizational leadership degree has given me an opportunity to build relationships, honestly, over the last 14 years with Jefferson County human services. And I've run a collaboration of churches here in South Jefferson County. I've got connections with Pastors all over the city, Denver Metro area, through a group called City Unite. So I think those connections have been a huge advantage. And then my time at Denver Seminary has been a gift. It has given me an opportunity to study the Bible through lenses that I hadn't looked at it before. It's given me a chance to interact with students and professors and faculty in a way that has made me, myself richer in my experience of who God is. And I think it's given me the opportunity to build deep, long lasting relationships with people from all walks of life.

Dr. Don Payne: How are or I should say what are some of, what are the distinctives that you want to mark the church plant you envisioned? What's it about?

Danielle Reeves: That's a great question. Yeah. You know, I've thought a lot about this. It's interesting that there's this, people in America are lonelier than they, than ever and feel disconnected from God from their community, from themselves. I think that's emphasized right now as we're all placed at home. It's just this lonely, lonely place. There's actually a number of articles there talking about loneliness being one of the leading causes of death. Loneliness is a big thing, but at the same time, there seems to be this rise in those who have no religious connection. There's this sharp decline in involvement in the local church, but people are looking for something. They're yearning for something. There's this recognition that there's something, there's got to be something more than this. That's kind of the question that people throw out there. So our dream for the church initiative of Lakewood, which is our kind of our temporary name as we're getting ready to launch our official name. You know, our dream is really to reach out to those who feel disconnected and are looking for kind of that deeper, more meaningful life that points them towards Jesus as the one who really can fulfill that emptiness. And so we see this you know, this has done a lot of different ways, but church plants are one of the effective ways that we see this expansion happening because it's a safe place for people who are skeptical, who are searching, who are hesitant about Christianity to find it a less intimidating at times environment to step in because everybody's new. So you're kind of all starting together. So that's really our hope is that we're providing a place for people to learn to love and live like Jesus.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I know you also, you've shared with me previously how that devastating loss of your son has become a real, a integral part of the way you think about ministry, the way you think about outreach. And I know that you have some designs on making that a part of the distinctive ethos of the church do you not, to those with disabilities of various sorts.

Danielle Reeves: Yes, that's exactly right. Yeah. So one of, yeah, one of the, I would say one of the distinctives of our churches that we really do have a passion for providing a place of community and worship for our families who have kids with special needs. Our families, we've got 7,000 families in Jefferson County alone who have kids with disabilities and there are not a lot of resources available for those families. Oftentimes they're working two or three jobs combined just to make ends meet and to pay the bills, but they're looking for connection. And oftentimes if a church doesn't, isn't equipped to provide those resources for families, it's really hard for them to go. And so we're partnering with a nonprofit called nightlights who provides respite care facilities for kids with special needs and they're typically developing siblings. And we're making sure that from the opening day that we're able to partner with our families, with kids with disabilities to provide a space of community. We're also kind of as an extension of that. One of the things we wanted to do was to see if there was a school in the green mountain area, which is where we're planning on planting, that we could adopt. And Fletcher Miller school is there. Fletcher Miller is the school for

kids with disabilities in all of Jeffco. We just kind of went and asked, Hey, can we, can we adopt you? Can we serve you? Can we care about your families and your teachers? And they have been excited to have us do that. So we're, once we all get back into the groove of things, we're looking forward to opportunities to get to know them better and really spend time serving those families.

Dr. Mark Young: Danielle, I have a question for you that may take us a little bit of a different direction in terms of folks who have children with disabilities, families. What do you think are the key questions that those folks are asking God? Have a child with or what, where are, where are they, what's their posture toward God when they find themselves in a situation like this?

Danielle Reeves: I think everybody my guess my guess is that just like when Aiden died and I was talking to other families who had lost children, we were all asking different questions at different times. My guess is that it's the same for families with kids with disabilities. I've heard questions like, why, why does my child have disabilities? Why isn't there a cure for this? I've heard questions around why do we feel so isolated? Why, if the church is a place that is to embrace everyone, why do we feel excluded from the church community? Why do people stare at my kid? Because my kid wants to be loved and cared for just like any other kid. So I think some of those questions, but I've also seen the flip side. I've seen the beauty of seeing Jesus in the eyes of my young friend Mac, who is nonverbal, but that kid glows Jesus like nobody I've ever seen. So I think there's these, these questions of why, but I also think there's this opportunity to this deeper understanding of who God is and God's grace. And God's mercy because of the incredible gift that all ability kids possess.

Dr. Mark Young: Several years ago we were a part of a church that began ministry with families, with children with disabilities. And during that time, during some of the research that they did, they discovered that families with children who have disabilities often have higher divorce rates or it puts a lot of pressure on the family as a whole. Have you found that to be true as you've interacted with families with children?

Danielle Reeves: Yeah, absolutely. Yep. Absolutely. It's yes, and it's, you know, it's hard to keep track of statistics anymore because I mean, divorce itself is high. But yes, it's very common because the amount of stress that those families are facing. I mean, you know, think about right now during the pandemic, our Fletcher Miller families have their kids at home and are homeschooling just like all the other families. Well, how do those parents continue to work their two or three jobs and do their homeschooling? So there's all these different aspects that come into it that create tension on a marriage. You've got a lot of people that are then raising kids who are single and they're raising kids with disabilities. And what does that look like? You know, how do you plan for long-term care for your kids? If you know that most likely the parent is the one that's going to die before the child, and for any of us how do you, how do you make long-term plans that so that your kids are well taken care of? So these are all the stressors that come and then you add that into the normal stressors that all of us have been, you

know, who are married and marital relationships. It does, it escalates the numbers as far as divorce goes.

Dr. Don Payne:

Danielle, one of the reasons we had wanted to interact with you was that with this pandemic at play predictably this, this would kind of alter, or at least to some extent affect the trajectory of church planting. I mean, anybody who's been part of a church plant or knows people who've done that probably knows that church planting is difficult under the very best of conditions. And as one of my friends says, nobody does it under the best of conditions. So what are you learning and what are you experiencing now about how the Coronavirus epidemic or pandemic has affected that trajectory and the ethos of your work as a church planter? What curves has it thrown your way and how are you swinging at them?

Danielle Reeves:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean there's a part of it that, you know, just like anything else, the unknown is the unknown. So it's hard to plan when you don't know when we're all getting back together. But there's been some really interesting pieces and I'm so appreciative. Right, when we all right when the state home orders came in, we had a phone call with Stadia, which is again, that church planting group that we're working with, with church planters from all over the country. And one of the staff members from Stadia said something really interesting. He took the circumstance and he put it into the positive and he said, one of the things that church planters are really good at, is rolling with the punches. You're good at finding creative solutions to things. This is just one more circumstance for you to roll with the punches and find creative solutions. And so that was really helpful because I thought, you know what, that's true. I mean it's, you know, so how are we going to continue to find ways to connect with people? So we ended up launching our social media sites coincidentally, like right after everybody started staying at home. And we've used Facebook as one of our primary ways just to connect with people. So in a whole bunch of different ways. So in the mornings we typically do an inspirational quote that's tied with scripture that people can respond or not respond. We had people send in pictures. So from the very front end of it, we talked about the fact that oftentimes the character of God is, we can witness it in nature and so people sent in their pictures.

So that could be part of our devotional every day. So that's been interesting. Some really great conversations have come off of that. Some private messaging where people have said, Hey, can you pray for me here? Or I'm struggling with this, or an amazing phone conversation around, you know, is God good? What does that look like? How do you interact and exchange his goodness with his justice? So there's kind of that category. Then there's this other category where we're just having fun. We you know, people are feeling burdened and so trying to put a little bit of light in the midst of that. And so we did a work from home theme day a couple of weeks ago where one day everybody dressed up as hippies and took pictures and then we voted on the best picture. And let's see, we did a game night. We did a virtual game night a couple of weeks ago and we probably had 10 people on the call and we played Jackbox TV from the, from via

zoom before zooms, you know, got a little bit crazy. We're doing this weekend we're actually having, Lori Krennic is an amazing counselor in the area and she's joining us for a zoom meetup on Saturday. And she's going to talk about how do you manage anxiety in the midst of the unknown. So we've got a lot of interest in that. So just really trying to kind of hit different felt needs. And I have been shocked at the level of engagement, which tells me people are at home, they're looking for some way to kind of have a touch point. And so it's just been a unique opportunity. We've got people from all over the United States that are part of that Facebook group. You know, for me it's a win because I'm getting people talking to each other. They're getting to know little bits and pieces about the church along the way. So it's raising awareness. So honestly in that sense it's actually been a really neat opportunity just to give people some access to us in a new way.

Dr. Don Payne: What do you anticipate some of the takeaways are going to be from all this, from this pandemic?

Danielle Reeves: One of them that I've thought a lot about is that there are a number of things that I miss because we're stuck at home and there are a number of things that probably need to stay out of the schedule once we all get back going, get back running. We're having more family dinners than we've had in since our kids were little. And so that's been a gift. We have three of our four kids home, even though, you know, two of them are in college and that's been challenging because everybody's trying to do school at the same time. But that's been something that's been a real gift. I think that moving forward as far as church goes, I think that we'll all need to make sure that we continue to have some sort of like online presence and the opportunity to engage online. And at the same time I think people may recognize the gift of getting to meet face to face. People are really missing gathering together. And so I think that this will give us that clarity that, gosh, we're better together when we're face to face. We can't always do that, but when we can, let's try to make sure that we're all in church, sit next to each other.

Dr. Mark Young: Danielle, it's interesting. I'm sure you have opportunities to think forward and dream about what it's going to be like when you all do get together and you have that opening service. Give us a snapshot. What do you think is going to be important for you as you do come together in those early meetings? What kind of components are you going to build into your time together?

Danielle Reeves: That's a great question. I think some of the things that come to mind is that idea of we're in it together. That's one of the things that has kind of kept coming up in some of the posts that we've been doing is that like, you're not alone. Your, the anx that you're feeling, you're not alone. The loneliness that you're feeling, you're isolated, but you're not alone. So this idea that we're in it together and I think that there's an aspect of that that is really key to the church. I think that there's an early church reflection that would be interesting to dive into right away, that idea that, you know, give a hand, take a hand. Let's share the resources that we have, I think could be a neat way to kind of launch things. And

in doing that, I think not only do we recognize that we all have something to offer, but I think it takes again, it kind of evens the playing field that when you're on the receiving side, at some point you're going to be back on the giving side. So I think there's this, it provides this opportunity for vulnerability to ask, but it also provides an opportunity for strength to say, no we're in it together. We're not going to hold this, hold this against you. And then I think that there's this beautiful illustration of the gospel of you know, I think it's interesting that this is Holy week and that the story doesn't end with Good Friday. And so launching at the tail end of a pandemic or in the midst of a pandemic man, this isn't the end of the story. Christ is coming back again. And when he comes again, he's restoring all things back to the way they were intended to be. And that's, that's good news. So those are some of the things that are kind of floating around in my head at this point.

Dr. Mark Young: Do you anticipate some of the normal traits of a church gathering where you'll have communal prayer and singing and a message from scripture? Do you anticipate those traits as well?

Danielle Reeves: Yeah, absolutely. But when you were talking about it, I started giggling cause I was thinking, but we might, we still might have to do it from six feet away. You know, I don't think we're just going to, I don't think it's just going to go back. We're going to spring back and everything is the way that it used to be. I think we're going to have to probably ease back into things and so we're going to need to get creative on what does it look like to do all of those elements of worship and prayer and communion and baptism, and still distance appropriately until we kind of overcome this pandemic.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. You know, it may be that the first century practice of a Holy kiss disappeared because it's a pandemic there and now we, now we may lose the practice of shaking hands that may become passé. Who knows?

Danielle Reeves: Yeah, that's very true.

Dr. Don Payne: You never know. Danielle what has all of this taught you theologically? What aspects of your own biblical faith and theological commitments have sort of bubbled to the surface or become even more intensely relevant or immediate for you as a result of all of this?

Danielle Reeves: I think the biggest thing that I've reflected on just on my own faith walk is the recognition that church planting is so reliant on God. You really, you don't have an option. Like everyday you get up and you, you have to trust God because you can't see the bridge that you're walking out onto. But I think that that was a shift from where I was. I was in a place where I thought that I was trusting God. But I think that the takeaway is that God is in control and I am not, and it sounds so simple, but when I get into the routine or I was in the routine of doing my thing and Pastoring my people it became easy to think in my head that I actually had more control than I did. And so that shift back to letting go and realizing like I really didn't have control all along, but really being faithful in handing that back

to God has been big for me. And one of the prompters of that was that I got to take the Book of Joshua, with Dr. Delayer last Fall. And Joshua 1.9, Like hit me in the head that have I not commanded you, be strong. And courageous. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. All of a sudden, I was, I thought I've been reading this the wrong way. I had this big aha moment that it's not that Joshua's courage and strength was because of himself. His courage and strength was because of the God he was standing in the presence of the God that went before, behind and beside him. And so for me, then it just becomes this recognition and this prayer. It's this constant prayer to be strong and courageous in my church planting, not in my own efforts, but because I trust in God's presence wherever he may lead.

Dr. Don Payne: And you know, you're a great. Mark. You were going to comment.

Dr. Mark Young: I was just going to ask another question. When you think about the future and you say, okay, in six months we want to be where and in a year we're going to be where? And if we're not there, how do I know when we need to make changes in what we're doing? Do you have that kind of in mind as well? Do the Stadia folks?

Danielle Reeves: Yeah, so one of the things Stadia is great at is that they not only do they assess church planters on the front end, but they then train and equip on the backend. And so we meet as a group every, and they have this entire process. We have a cohort, I have a project manager, and they walk us through a process so that by the time we launch, we're really trying to launch that first week, for opening week with 450 people. Wow. And the reason behind that is because if we launch at 450, we all know that in Colorado attendance is 1.4 times a month, or 1.4 times a month. So that means week to week we're at about 150 and if you fall much below a hundred church planting becomes really hard. You lose some of that critical mass. So right now it's almost like following the playbook, you kind of, you put the pieces in place, you get your name out there, you gather people in a launch team, you get them to start getting excited about it. And so, you know, you follow the game plan until let's say my launch date is October. And then as you get closer, if you know that you're not hitting some of those markers, then you can begin to kind of push it back a little bit. So that's where we're at. We were before we all went into shutdown, we were right on track to hit our marker for the beginning of October. We've been open handed the whole time knowing if it's not this Fall, it'll probably be January. That's another one of those. It's God's deal and just trying to step, step in and be obedient. But those are some of, yeah, those are some of the numbers. Right now we have 76 people on our launch team. So again, before we had to stay home, we were doing church launch gatherings. And of those 76, I think our biggest gathering was about 50, just having dinner together and casting a little bit of vision and spending time getting to know each other.

Dr. Mark Young: Excellent.

Dr. Don Payne: So how can people get more information on your church planting if they want to know more?

Danielle Reeves: Yup, absolutely. So a couple of different ways you can visit our website, which is churchinitiativelakewood.org. We've got a Facebook group and that's the place I talked about earlier that is really active. So even if you're not sure, you know, you want to be a part of the church, that's okay. Come and join our Facebook group. I think you'll really enjoy it. And that's under church initiative of Lakewood. And then our Instagram page is at church initiative. And then if you've got questions you know, if you want to learn more, you are always welcome to email me at Danielle at [churchinitiativelakewood.org](mailto:danielle@churchinitiativelakewood.org) or you can message me on Facebook

Dr. Don Payne: And your home a lot. So you've got lots of times for that.

Danielle Reeves: Yes I am. Too much.

Dr. Don Payne: Plenty of time to respond to emails then.

Dr. Mark Young: Danielle, we're thrilled. We're thrilled. About what God's called you to do. And I want to say, just as a part of seminary, we're proud of you. And we're willing to step in and help in whatever way that we can. And we pray God's richest blessings on your ministry. May the Lord Jesus be known widely through what you're doing at Lakewood.

Danielle Reeves: Thank you, Dr. Young. I appreciate that. That means a lot.

Dr. Don Payne: We've been interacting with Danielle Reeves soon to be graduated from Denver Seminary and on the trajectory of church planting in Lakewood, Colorado. And we're as Mark said, very proud of you and just grateful to be some part of this and want to invite listeners to approach you with questions if they have those, and to be praying for you give us, give us one less way. Maybe this is an obvious question, but how can people pray for you?

Danielle Reeves: Yeah that's a great question. So there's kind of three things we always encourage people is pray, give and go. So one of the prayers is that we can continue to build community with people who don't have, who don't have a space. And I do think during this pandemic is a great time. People are looking for connection. So continue to pray for that. You can parade that. You know, as the financial world has changed a bit, and our economy has shifted that God will continue to use his people to fund his church and that people would have a desire to go. So those are kind of our three prayer requests is our, you know, pray for people, pray for finances, and pray for opportunities to join us.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. We'll encourage people to pray for that and we will as well. Danielle, thank you.

Danielle Reeves: Thanks Dr. Payne

Dr. Don Payne: Great to be with you. This is Engage360 from Denver Seminary on behalf of Dr. Young, Dr. Mark Young. I'm Don Payne and want to give a shout out to our production team and all those who work so tirelessly behind the scenes every week to make this thing happen. We're grateful for them. Grateful for you as you've carved out a little bit of time to be with us and hope you'll do that on a weekly basis. Please feel our invitation to write to us with comments or questions. You can reach us at our email address, which is podcast@denverseminary.edu. We hope you will be well and be wise, but also be engaged. Talk to you soon. Take care.