

Engage360 | Episode 36: Ministry Spotlight with Keith and Iantha Brown

- 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 am Don Payne, your host. We're really glad and very grateful that you would take a little time out of your week to join us during this time of crisis from the Coronavirus and COVID-19. We need not only to share physical resources where they're needed, but we also need to share resources like ideas and strategies and that's why we want to introduce you to people in different ministry settings and interact with them about how they're responding and what they're learning in all of this. Now, we all in a sense need to be lending each other insight and creative ideas and courage as we all try to figure out how do we engage the challenges presented to us these days, in genuinely redemptive ways. Now this week we want to turn our attention to the local church setting and interact with a husband and wife pastoral team in the Washington DC area, Dr. Keith Brown and Reverend Iantha Brown, or the Pastors of Refuge Church Ministries II in Glen Burnie, Maryland. So welcome to Engage360 Iantha and Keith.
- Iantha Brown: Thank you so much for having us, we are delighted to be a part of this podcast.
- Dr. Keith Brown: Absolutely.
- Dr. Don Payne: And actually both Keith and Iantha are current Denver Seminary students Iantha is in the MDiv program at our DC campus and Keith is in the doctor of ministry program now. I first met Heath and I believe in a Doctoral seminar last summer. Is that correct? Keith? Was it last summer?
- Dr. Keith Brown: That's correct. Yes sir.
- Dr. Don Payne: So I got, I got to know a little bit about their ministry then and I'll ask both of them to tell you a bit more about themselves. Cause Keith is in his in pastoral ministry after a full career, I believe with the federal government.
- Dr. Keith Brown: Yes, absolutely.
- Dr. Don Payne: So I didn't know if you were designing you know, electrical systems in government buildings or what you were doing.
- Dr. Keith Brown: I worked for 34 years in the department of defense. And so you name it, we did it. And we kept the nation safe.
- Dr. Don Payne: Well, we're grateful. All of us give her your, our gratitude for that. Before we go any further, I want to recognize and express our gratitude to the First Baptist Church of Glen Burnie, Maryland and Pastor John Jenkins for their very

generous hosting of our Washington DC site. And I'll take this opportunity to say hi to all of our DC students and to Deborah Barr, our DC site director. We're so grateful for, yeah. So grateful for the work there. So Iantha and Keith first of all, in a general sense, why don't you tell us a little bit about your backgrounds and including your faith and your ministry journeys, and what led you to Denver Seminary.

Iantha Brown:

Okay. I'll kind of start a little bit. I had a career in nursing for almost three decades actually. And of course that was earlier on. And Keith of course was doing his engineering piece separate and apart. We didn't know each other while we were going through that process. But at any rate I grew up in the United Methodist Church, so my background isn't, is as a Methodist. When Keith came to the area and he can tell you a little bit more about his story, but when he came to the area, he was kind of recruited into my home church. And so that was kind of, you know, our initial meetings because his, one of my former Pastors knew him and his family, and introduced us. And so that was kind of our connection. And then from there we went forward once we were married we stayed a part of the United Methodist Church for a number of years. And then we left the United Methodist church and went into a nondenominational setting together. And there was really, when we began to, well, always very active in ministry. We, you could call us church babies. We were birthed into church. And so, and that goes for both of us. And we spent all of our lives in the church. And, but as time went on we began to start to explore other types of ministries within the church, i.e., I at one point was a lay leader in the, in the United Methodist Church. Began the, the going down the path of pastoral ministry in the United Methodist Church. But as I said, we did leave and go into the a nondenominational church. Keith was very much a part of music ministry and again started to explore other areas of ministry, and we were ordained in the nondenominational church. And we were going along well and thought everything was good. But what ended up happening was I was working at a hospital right beside Washington DC, right outside of Washington DC. I was working as a nursing leader and my job was abolished. And so it was a time of trying to hear from God and figure out what that really meant because most people felt like, you're a nurse, you can get a job, you know, anywhere. But Keith was gracious enough and discerning enough to have me to sit and wait and hear whether or not God was closing a door and changing direction. And so with that time of sitting and praying, we began to sense that God had closed that door and he was changing our direction. And with that was really the birth of our church.

Dr. Don Payne:

So you're both in a sense, second career Pastors.

Iantha Brown:

Exactly. Exactly. Second career. Yes, sir. And so that was back in 2009. Mind you, this was in the midst of, if you will remember, the great economic downturn and real estate markets were, you know, people were losing homes and jobs and money and all kinds of things and so we just could not figure out what God was really doing and why was he doing it now? And you know, we figured we, both

of us probably would enter full time ministry at some point, but it wasn't supposed to be then, not according to our calculations.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, you know, that's interesting that, I mean, what a unique time to launch a ministry, a time where the economy is tanking. But in several of the interviews we've had recently that has been a recurring theme, that crisis actually creates ministry. And you can see that historically the most desperate times are the times that some of the most significant ministries are birthed.

Dr. Keith Brown: Right. One of the things she left out was that I was also investing a lot in real estate during that time.

Iantha Brown: And things went really well for you then, huh?

Dr. Keith Brown: Yeah. And you know, it's a part of our story. We lost millions, you know, basically. And it was no fault of our own if we could tell. But in the middle of that, here comes God saying you, Oh, I have a, I have an assignment for you. It's different and you're going to have to do it. And we're like, well, I don't think so. You know how you always push things off when you think God is calling you to do something.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, it's that Jonah complex, right?

Iantha Brown: Exactly. Yeah.

Dr. Don Payne: I don't think so, Lord.

Dr. Keith Brown: Yeah. So we eventually decided that we have heard what God was saying and we ended up starting the church in the middle of that whole big mess and we now we look back and we thank God for what he did for us, but we had no idea what we were getting into at the time. And we were like, you know, we don't know that we really want to do this. Not now.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. So tell us a bit about the church, Refuge Church Ministries Two.

Dr. Keith Brown: Well it is a relatively small church, but it is a church that is big and spirit and big and heart. We have been able to touch a lot of people with our ministry and our outreach programs, you know, from giving turkeys and toys to dealing with the opioid crisis to you name it. Whenever we saw a need and God was leading us, we would jump right in with a few people, but people with big willing hearts to ready to work and jump in there. We, we've fed the homeless and even stayed with them overnight, you know, and so we've done a lot of things over these last almost 11 years that God has required that we do. And it has been really interesting because it's a small, not overly small, but small enough where we know each other well. People are, they are so happy to see each other. They are happy to praise God together. And we're just a church of loving people. I guess our range in age goes from like about three or four months to 85.

Dr. Don Payne: That's a pretty good spread. Yeah. Tell us, tell us a bit about Glen Burnie, where you're situated.

Dr. Keith Brown: I'll let my wife tell you that cause she's originally from Glen Burnie.

Iantha Brown: Yeah. Yeah. That's another part of God's humor showing up. Because the one thing that I did not plan for is to minister back at home. I thought, you know, some other town, some of the city. But anyway, God landed us. We had been searching for a building because we were worshiping in a local hotel. And so the first place that really embraced us was this was a former retail space. It was a hardware store that had been in the community for decades. When my mother was a little girl, it was a hardware store. So that's how long it had been there. But any rate, they opened their space to us and, and allowed us to come and worship there. So we're in Glen Burnie in a town called Ferndale. It's multicultural, predominantly Caucasian community, which I knew well because I went to school there. My classmates were, you know, in the vicinity and all like that. So Glen Burnie is a working town and I would say it sort of situated between the Baltimore Washington corridor, but closer to the Baltimore, actually closer to Baltimore, probably about, I don't know, maybe 15 miles or so from a Annapolis, Maryland, which is the capital of the state. So it's a working town, you know, middle class blue collar people. A lot of other, you know, churches, you know, in the facility. And so it's been a blessing. It's been a blessing. It's a community that has many of the same problems and issues that you hear about on the nightly news with, you know, homelessness. We, we've had several homeless people just drop in, just pull the door and come in and sit down, and you know, we've, you know, fed them spiritually and physically. We've you know, like I said, anything that you hear about that plagues our world in terms of, like I said, homelessness to drug addiction, opioid issues all of those things right there around us. And so we saw God placing us in a spot where we could shed some light.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, you're pretty close to the epicenter, certainly to the political epicenter of our country. And I'm wondering what it's like with the COVID-19 crisis there. How are things affecting you all, particularly in your community and how is your church finding ways to respond to that?

Iantha Brown: Well as I said, it's kind of like what you're hearing about from all around the country in terms of a lot of people that are, you know, not working. People who are you know, just living with unprecedented uncertainty in a lot of cases. So what we are, what we have decided to do in our ministry, in our context is of course, we're really trying to be very intentional about our touch points and how we are reaching out to them because obvious the governor here just like across the nation has declared us to all be in, you know, inside, except for when it's absolutely necessary to go out. So that means that we're going to, we had to figure out ways to use the technology that we have available to us to reach out to the people and to be able to touch them. Because what we have found out, one of the things that, and I'm sure we'll talk about this as we go forward, but one of the things that we have that's really been apparent to us is that people

are fearful, they're fearful. And so they are needing something or someone to hold on to say, we're going to get through this and it's going to be okay. So we're challenged on some fronts because, you know, we're, we're trying to use this technology and I say tried to use it because generally we have someone in our church that handles, you know, all of those pieces. But at home my husband and I were trying to figure out, okay, now how are we going to, how do we do this?

Dr. Don Payne: Everybody has to be an expert now. Right?

Iantha Brown: Exactly. Exactly. but so we've been able to work at work through that and we have had, you know, one person to come and to manage that of course at a distance, you know, from us in our home. So that, you know, kind of works for us. But one of the other things is and just to kind of give you an example about how this is impacting people, as Keith said, our church is small and the people know each other very well. And so we have created what we consider very strong ties and bonds with each other. In other words, that people care about one another. And so and of course everybody has enjoyed coming to church on Sunday mornings. And since that's no longer our story at the moment I received a phone call one day from one of our members and she says, you know, hi. And I said, well, hello? She said, well, what'd you doing? I said, well, I'm just kind of sitting back. I said, I actually had drifted off and was taking a little nap. She said well, will you come to the door. I thought, will I come to the door? Okay, I jumped up and I went and I opened the door and there she was in her car, in our driveway. And she just waved and saying, just wanted to see your smiling face. And so that, that's kind of spoke volumes as to the, you know, the sacrifice and kind of going out of her way because we don't live, you know, around the corner from each other.

Dr. Don Payne: But it isn't that, doesn't that speak to how much we need to see each other in real life. It's great to be able to look at each other on a computer screen if that's what we have is heightened our awareness of how much we need each other's presence.

Iantha Brown: Absolutely. And I, you know, and it certainly is coming out more and more how God made us to be in community with one another and what it means when that has kind of been taken away from us, you know, and we understand the reasons why and we want to be safe and all of that. But yes, absolutely.

Dr. Don Payne: Are there ways that all of this has maybe changed how you think about ministry? Has it brought certain things to the surface that you hadn't had to think about before or change the way you think about how you minister?

Dr. Keith Brown: Well, it definitely brought things to the forefront that we didn't have to deal with before. We had streaming services, but never did we have to do them in a vacuum. The vacuum being our home, you know, Sunday mornings trying to pull things together, making sure that we could get the lighting to a certain arrogant, you know, so that we could at least be seen well. We've had to go out on

different formats that we have not been using in total before. And so, you know, that was just one aspect of how things changed. And my wife was mentioning when we were discussing this whole podcast earlier, we were talking about how now when we look at the fact that we got to do these services, you know, in the African American community, we are used to a strong call and answer kind of format. But yet now as we give our messages, there's nobody there. So we're kind of trying to say, well, in our brains, where is the response? You know, but the, you got the call but there is no response because there's nobody there but us. So that's been quite interesting as well. So we're finding a lot of different things happening as a result.

Iantha Brown: I was going to add you that. The, the one thing that I was sharing with Keith is it makes you much more dependent on the Holy spirit. You know, the spirit within you. So that it, so that's what exudes and touches the people. The streaming stuff. Of course. Yes, we did prior to, but it wasn't assigned. It was sort of an extra, now it's it, it's kind of big, and for the season, so yeah, it, it has really made us sit and figure out ways, one of the things that we were able to do, I guess the word that keeps ringing in my head is intentionality. We have to be really intentional about how we're going to reach people because the one thing we don't want them to do is to lose hope. It's, you know, that that connection has to be there, you know? And so we'd have to figure out ways to make sure that happens. But one of the things that kind of came up as a suggestion through one of our ministers is that we would divide up the people of the church and they were called them individually and see if there was any prayer requests specific or just general. And we did it with our youth and everybody just to check, just to check in, how are you doing? And do you have anything that I can pray for you for? And the response was absolutely overwhelmingly positive.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. It shows all of us how many things we take for granted. When they're stripped away by any form of crisis or unexpected circumstance, we have to lean, well, when they're, when they're stripped away, we find out what's really at the core. And they have to be as you said, I have to be all the more intentional about preserving those core features. I wonder what do you, what do you think I'm going to ask you to forecast a little bit down the road, when all of this passes, hopefully may the Lord make it so sooner rather than later. Well, what do you think we're going to learn and how do you think we're going to be different after all of this?

Dr. Keith Brown: Well, if you're looking biblically, we can look at that some of us have been saying, cause I grew up as a preacher's kid, so I learned a lot of Bible back when I was growing up. And one of the things that we always learned was in Ecclesiastes. When it would say there's nothing new under the sun, I think this whole pandemic has heightened the belief and the intentionality of this whole thing in our brains that says there really is nothing new under the sun that, you know, pestilence and disease has happened before. But you know, it also gives us a certain amount of wisdom about what has gone on that now that we have survived or we are surviving such a huge pestilence in the land, that now we can

really believe what God was saying when he allowed Solomon to write those words that, you know, this is nothing new to God. It didn't catch him by surprise, but certainly it's catching us by surprise and now we will have to deal accordingly with where we are. And there are many other examples that we could probably point to, but that was just one that kind of came to mind as we were discussing this earlier.

Dr. Don Payne: Do you think we as a church or we even as a nation are going to see ourselves any differently after all of this?

Iantha Brown: Well, we certainly hope so. We certainly hope that we will. And I think it depends on what people have done with this time. I'm certain that that the slow down, the country coming to a halt in many respects has offered the opportunity for people to sit, reflect, pray, reconsider how life should look moving forward. But it's only if you use that time to your advantage for when the country opens up again. We used to say that time was a healer or greatest healer or great healer, right? But I've learned Dr. Payne, through my life, that it's not always the time, but it's what you do with the time.

Dr. Don Payne: That's a good distinction.

Iantha Brown: Yes. And so when you, when we have all had this time to sit and reflect and to really seek God in it and see what he's saying in this hour of social distancing and people dying all around us. And yet some of us are surviving, some of us, you know, we will survive this absolutely, most of us will survive it. So I think that, that when you look at it from that perspective, and what you do with that time, it should change us. It should, I'm praying that the church comes out stronger than it before. Yeah. I really am. I prayed that we can be a driver in the culture more so than we have been. I think in a lot of ways. Unfortunately, our churches had begun to almost blend in. It probably in a lot of ways it had began to blend in with the culture and I believe God has called us to be set apart and to live differently and to do things differently.

Dr. Keith Brown: We're also, I just want to interject, I'm hoping, and I know that my wife is also hoping that this will not turn into another 9/11 incident where, you know, churches were overrun with people when the twin towers were hit, but then after that the attendance fell off.

Dr. Don Payne: It goes back to normal.

Iantha Brown: Yes, exactly. It's almost like people forgot, you know, the panic and all that that had set in their hearts. They just didn't hold on to it.

Dr. Don Payne: We need some enduring effects.

Iantha Brown: Yeah. We do, we really do. So the church has a great, I think the church and in this pandemic, has a great role to play. I think we can be instrumental and very

significant in helping people to make it, you know, the, through this. But it certainly remains to be seen the long-term impact that it's going to have on those who are non-believers. Hopefully they will see something in us, something in us that we were, that we persevered, that we endured, that we were able to live out the faith that we professed through this time. I'm hopeful that is what they'll see and it will cause them to want to see just what that's all about.

Dr. Don Payne: You've very wisely brought in front of us that need for hope and that need for clarity and certainty. And of course that can be artificially manufactured certainty where there really is no certainty, hope, where there really is no hope. But that's, it's probably where we have one of our greatest opportunities, right? Is people be both equally realistic, and find the Lord's word of hope in the middle of all that. How, our final question for you, how are you talking to your people these days to help them find that hope? In the middle of honest realism?

Dr. Keith Brown: I would say when, when we look at how we have been running the church for these 11 years, you might as well say, we had a mandate, we believe from God when we started with the church to preach the word, but not only preach the word but preach it with enlightenment, with enrichment, and with encouragement. And we strongly leaned on the encouragement part of our servants because we felt like we really needed to make sure that individuals understood that God is a God who loves us and there is hope in him. And so what we've done overly so, I would say probably is concentrate deeply on the sermons that we're giving on, especially those that we are now doing on the streaming services. We are concentrating on encouragement. We are telling people there is hope in the middle of this, even though there is death and dying and all those kinds of things, there still is hope. And for those of us who trust in God and know him and are saved by him, we have the assurance that we don't have to worry about this world as we stand here and look at it. That even if we're not healed on this side, on the other side, we will be having eternal life. And so we don't have to be afraid. We don't have to fall apart, we don't have to get scared, you know, because God is the one that we look towards. And so that's what we're doing quite a bit. And we've even taken time to just take like five minutes ever so often get on one of the Facebook streaming services or whatever, and just give a word of hope from some of the devotionals we've written before or we'll pray, and do some other things. I was even telling my wife, I'm probably going to try to get on the organ at church. I'm going to go over there and maybe play a few songs and hopefully people will listen to that and get a little hope from that as well.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I love the way you, I'm sorry. I love the way you put that, Keith, because that really does distinguish the kind of hope that the Gospel gives us. It's not a hope that everything's going to be all right circumstantially, because we don't know that. We can't guarantee to people that that they won't get it. We can't guarantee that they will. We can't guarantee they're going to be okay financially. We, so where's the hope? Well, the hope is then that those circumstances don't own us and don't define us. What undergirds us regardless of how well or how poorly things may go for us circumstantially. It's good to get

to hear y'all drilling that message in and you get in front of your people. Thank you both for taking time with us.

Iantha Brown: Thank you for having us.

Dr. Don Payne: It's been a real, been a real treat. We we've been interacting with Reverend Iantha Brown and Dr. Keith Brown from Refuge Church Ministries Two in Glen Burnie, Maryland and we're just so grateful to know them and have them part of the Denver Seminary family and grateful for the work you're doing for the Gospel there in the Northeast. I hope it's warmer there for you right now than it is here because we've got a lot of snow on the ground, so.

Dr. Keith Brown: Oh, really.

Dr. Don Payne: And more coming. So, I hope that cherry blossoms and all that are in full bloom out there.

Dr. Keith Brown: Yeah, everything is looking good up here.

Dr. Don Payne: Bless you both. Thanks again for spending time with us.

Iantha Brown: Thank you for having us.

Dr. Don Payne: To all of our listeners, thank you for spending time with us. We want to acknowledge all of our production staff and all they do to make this podcast happen. So for everybody here at Denver Seminary be well, be wise, be safe, but be engaged. This is Don Payne, your host, and we'll talk to you again next week. Take care.