

Engage360 | Episode 45: Leading Through Crisis

- 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 everybody. This is Engage360 again, I'm Don Payne and happy to be joined by our president, Dr. Mark Young, and our honored guest this week, Pastor John Jenkins, who is senior Pastor of First Baptist Church of Glenarden, Maryland has been serving in that role, I believe since 1989. Pastor Jenkins welcome to Engage360.
- Pastor Jenkins: I am so honored to be with you. Thank you for having me. I salute you Brother, Don, and certainly have the highest respect for Dr. Young and his leadership of Denver and his friendship. So he's an incredible leader and I'm honored to be with you all today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Well, we're honored to have a little bit time with you, and we're, we're grateful for your church First Baptist being host to Denver Seminary is Washington DC campus, which you've done for several years, very generously, and we want to express our deep thanks for that and all the impact that's making in the area there.
- Pastor Jenkins: And one of the reasons that I was so honored to bring and have Denver at First Baptist church is because it brings to our community a level of leadership and training that is so needed in our community. So I'm delighted to have Denver there.
- Dr. Don Payne: We are glad to hear that Pastor Jenkins serves in a lot of different roles. In addition to his senior leadership role at First Baptist, he's chair of the board of the Skinner Leadership Institute, which was founded by Tom Skinner some years back. He is chair of the board of directors of the National Association of Evangelicals. And we, selfishly speaking are probably most delighted that he serves on the board of trustees here at Denver Seminary. And we want to thank you for that and all the wisdom and experience you bring to that role. Pastor Jenkins, tell us a little bit about First Baptist church, if you would, before we get into the heart of our conversation.
- Pastor Jenkins: Oh my, our church was started as a Sunday school in 1917, and I am the seventh Pastor that the church has had since 1917. And it's my home church. Matter of fact, it's the only church I've ever belonged to in life. And so when, when the pastor, before me John W. Johnson who had served the church for 33 years when he passed, they looked among the sons of the church for the new Pastor and it got narrowed down to me and the previous Pastors, biological son who was a mentor to me actually. So I was selected and chosen, honored for that. And I represent change. And so the church has changed so much over these past 30 years since I've been there. If you were there 30 years ago and, and didn't

come back until last Sunday, it's a totally different church, so much has changed with it. And it's been an honor to be leading people who once taught me in Sunday school. Deacon Walton used to tell me in Sunday school, sit down, John Jenkins. He was about Sunday. And I got a great kick out of being able to tell him to sit down and [inaudible].

Dr. Don Payne: That's it, there is. However little bit there is some justice in the universe, right?

Pastor Jenkins: Well, so it's been a joy. It's been a journey and a joy and yeah, it's a great church. I'm proud to be the Pastor, the church is doing great work in the community. It's a great ministry and I'm honored to be leading this congregation of wonderful people.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I was there just, maybe five or six years ago and can honestly say I have never been treated with more graciousness and hospitality than in your congregation and kudos to you and all of them. Now, First Baptist is a pretty large church. And for listeners who may not know exactly where it is, it's just off the DC beltway on the Maryland side, kind of East Northeast

Pastor Jenkins: Due East, due East to Washington DC. Yeah.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. And a pretty large congregation. A lot of facilities.

Pastor Jenkins: Yeah. When we were meeting, we probably averaged around 11,000 people on a weekend between our four services and we have multiple sites and it's a great ministry.

Dr. Don Payne: How's the whole online live streaming thing going for you?

Pastor Jenkins: You know, the thing about this pandemic and the online thing is, is like so many churches, probably most churches, our online viewership was already strong, but since the pandemic, it has gone off to chain. I think we're averaging around 50,000 people on a weekend streaming from all our platforms. You know, we've gotten, I get a report every week and I, and when I first started getting these reports, I was like, that's not true. That can't be right. But they assured me that these are solid numbers. So it's amazing.

Dr. Don Payne: And I'm always happy if I get 50 people to listen to me. You're in another league. Well, today, Dr. Young, and I really wanted to visit with you about in the broadest terms, what it means to lead a congregation during times of crisis, times of unrest. Like we've been in for some months now and some of the issues, that have bubbled up or related to all of that, I know Mark's got some more specific questions. Why don't you lead off in the conversation Mark?

Dr. Mark Young: Sure. Obviously, Pastor being a Pastor when you can't be with people is a very different challenge. How have you been able to connect with people and

continue to speak into their lives, even though you're not seeing them face to face? What are those challenges for you personally and for your church?

Pastor Jenkins: You know, that's a great question Dr. Young, I am a relational person. I am one of my strengths is interpersonal relationships. I love people. I love being around people. I'm fueled by people. My gifts flow best around people. So for me, it's been a huge challenge. You know, and that's certainly, I miss our people, our leaders, our congregation, I miss seeing them, but we try to communicate with them and give them the avenues to communicate back. So through emails and text messages and through social media we try to maintain a level of contact to the best degree that we can. It's certainly not the same as meeting in person. And certainly the technology like Zoom, the Zoom deal helps a lot. That's whoever came up with that application, that program was God sent. So to be able to at least see their faces, same thing for our staff we have our monthly staff meetings and we're doing it through Zoom and I'm able to see their faces. I require them to come home, come online and let me see them. And so that ability to connect that way and just let information flow the big deal. What are we doing? What's changing? What's different? What's going to do? So keeping that flow of information going helps people feel still a part and still connected. So that's the big thing that we try to do is communicate.

Dr. Mark Young: Pastor, have you, have you seen in your congregation, I'm assuming in your congregation, like so many, you've had families who've lost incomes. You've had families who even more tragically have lost loved ones. So that pastoral care side of being a Pastor, have you been able to, how have you been able to step into those real tangible needs?

Pastor Jenkins: So you know, part of what we've worked out in our church, this is a leadership rule. I'm getting ready to tell you, my focus as the Pastor. I can't pastor 11,000 people. So my passion, my assignment, my responsibility is Pastoring the leaders of the church and caring for them. And then I look for those leaders and those servants to serve the rest of the congregation. And that's been my task is focusing on ministering to the leaders and so caring for them, loving on them, calling them, praying with them, helping them in any way that we can. And I empower them to do the same with the rest of the congregation, what I do with them I empower them to do the same thing with the people that they're serving in the congregation, and that that model is working for us. And that's something that we have put in place prior to the pandemic. That's the principle that we operated on prior to the pandemic. I focus on the leaders, the leaders focus on the rest of the congregation. And so in our church, we got probably you know, we got about a hundred ministers, about a hundred deacons, about 80 or 90 Deaconess. And then we have 120 ministries, and I focus on those leaders of those ministries. So through that process, that's how we seeking to provide our pastoral care to the congregation.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I was going to ask you if there have been any unexpected challenges, anything unforeseen that has sort of thrown a curve ball to you during the events of the last four months?

Pastor Jenkins: Let me see. That's a great question. You know, this pandemic was an unexpected ball, that ball is big enough on his own. And of course, all of these racial tensions that have gone on have been a huge deal. So these were interruptions. So I was in the middle of a series when this whole thing happened. So I had to interrupt that series in order to speak to the racial issues that are now confronting the community. So again, communications letting people know, what does the people want to know Pastor, what do you think about this? What are your feelings about the pandemic? What's your feelings about the racial issues and the protesting and the police and all of this? What's your thoughts? So my role has been just to communicate my heart and I'm trying to always make sure my heart is lined up with scripture. Anything that I'd tell them that I want them to do, I always try to give a biblical basis for it. So that's what I've been doing.

Dr. Don Payne: I'm curious how you would characterize the messages. What is it that you've tried to communicate to the congregation about how to navigate the pandemic, how to navigate the racial unrest in faithful ways, what are you telling them?

Pastor Jenkins: Yeah. I can talk about both of those things for quite a while. Let me just talk about the pandemic. First of all, number one the pandemic, the people are concerned about their health and I'm telling them God still loves them. God hadn't stopped being God. He has an abandoned his role. He's still in control, he's still in charge. And so I've been communicating that message to them. I've, I've communicated to them. We're going to make decisions in the best interest of the congregation. I know at one point some of our political leaders, they were promoting that we need to hurry up and get back to the economy and get back to opening up the economy. And that's not the message that we want to communicate to our community because our community is a high risk community. The numbers of people who have been infected by the virus, it has greatly effected on a higher level in the African American community than in other communities. So I'm looking out for the best interests of the people that I serve, and I'm telling them we're not going to open up. We don't want, we want them to stay safe, stay in their homes. God's still God. Protect yourself. So that's number one. What I've been telling them, make safe sound decisions.

And I've also said to them, if you're a faithful member of First Baptist, if you get in trouble financially give us a call, let us know. And I mean, empowered our team to be able to help serve those communities. So that's the pandemic thing. Let me shift over to the racial tensions. So we, we spoken to the fact that we're living in a culture and in a community where if we don't like what's going on the way we change that is not the rioting. We change it by getting involved in the political process. We press people to vote. We press people to, if you don't like what a political officer's doing, and you think you can do a better job, run for office. But by all means get engaged, register to vote, go vote. Let's do that. That's the biggest thing we can do. Marching is fine. Protesting is fine, but if you don't go to the voting booth and cast your vote for political leaders that represent your values and your beliefs, you are making a mistake. And you have no right to complain if you don't participate in the political process. So that's

what, those are the two big things I've been telling them in the midst of this, all of this.

Dr. Mark Young: You know, Pastor, it feels like that. On the one hand, you have this emotional response to the George Floyd killing, Ahmed Arbury, the other tragic events of a look of fear and tension. And on the other hand, you have real frustration and anger, two different emotional responses within the community, within each individual, almost. What's the prophetic word, what's the pastoral word? And what's the prophetic word from the pulpit, from God's word. You want to, you want to communicate to people?

Pastor Jenkins: From a pesto standpoint and of course, what we have done over the years. This George Floyd situation is new to our community for us to be aware of it. And all the way back to the Trayvon Martin incident, we have conversations and teach our people about righteousness, about what's the right thing to do. When it came to the Eric Garner thing in New York, we again highlight the fact that Pastorally, we say to our people, when you get pulled over by the police, do what they tell you to do. That's the conversation I have to have with my children. And without congregation, we had seminars and trainings with our black men and black boys. If you get pulled over, do what the police officer tells you to do. Don't resist, don't fight, don't argue, just do what they tell you to do. That's not pastoral work to them, prophetically. And I'm glad you asked me that question, Dr. Young, because you know we have to speak out against injustice. I'm troubled by some of the tele evangelists who try to separate social justice from the Gospel. I'm wondering what Bible are they reading? The Bible speaks to these things. The Bible talks about this.

Dr. Don Payne: Relentlessly.

Pastor Jenkins: Yes. It just it crushes my heart to hear some of the religious leaders of our day say that there's no place in the Bible or in the church to talk about social justice. I can't get that. I can't get my head around that. What Bible are you reading? I'm trying to ask them, when the Bible speaks to this, so very plainly and clearly. It is the role and responsibility to speak for the oppressed and those who have been marginalized. That's the heart of the scriptures. And if I'm wrong Dr. Young and Dr. Payne, please tell me, I'll shift my preaching and teaching if I'm wrong. So that's troubling to me and I don't have a problem pointing that out. I hate to have to say that, but I have to point out some of these Pastors, who I feel are insensitive to the plight of, of the oppressed and poor in our community and in our nation, I think is deeply troubling. So I mean, I hope I'm answering your question, Dr. Young on the pastoral side of what I say, and to our people and on the prophetic side of what we say too.

Dr. Mark Young: It seems to me, Pastor that we have to have a crisis before it becomes a national conversation. And that's troubling to me as well. You've been through, as you named off those brothers, those men who were killed by police officers, before that there were many more, how do you keep going? How do you stay on task to continue to call the nation to justice? And how do you address those who are

so frustrated? They just want to go and express their anger in ways that are understandable, on the other hand sometimes not helpful.

Pastor Jenkins:

Yeah. So, you know I think I believe what I try to teach our congregation is the power of prayer, the power of looking to God to bring relief and deliverance and answers. And we're teaching people how to pray both individually and corporately as one of the big components, how to fast every year, we lead our church into a season of fasting and praying, not just for their personal issues in their life, but for the condition of our nation, the conditions of our communities. We try to, you know, press them to put their eyes on the Lord and let's honor God let's honor Christ. Let's seek him for the deliverance and answer to our dilemmas. And let's see God working. In the last election cycle, we had about 15 of our members who after hearing me talk and challenge them on this, who decided to run for some political office and none of them got one office that they were pursuing, none of them won. And we're looking to continue to keep people of faith, people of biblical convictions to continue to become engaged in the political process, and in the political affairs of our community. That's the only way to make a change is we got to get involved. And so I'm proud of our members who have done that, and they keep me apprised. They call me Pastor here's, what's coming down the pike. Here's what we're doing. Here's what you want to be aware of. They are good members, and of course I don't direct how they vote, but they value my thoughts. And they take it into consideration when they are recommending laws or voting on laws. They give me high honor in that regard.

Dr. Mark Young:

You interact with a lot of white folk, and you're the chairman of a board of an organization that has been historically predominantly white. What is your message to those of us who lead white institutions, schools, churches, and others in a time like this in relationship to the tragedy, you've discrimination, the tragedy you've ongoing racial bias?

Pastor Jenkins:

Wow. Dr. Young, if more Anglos would ask that question, the world would be a better place. And then we salute you for a heart to even ask me that question. And I would say to Anglos, the first thing we really need is to speak up and say something. The silence of the Anglo church has been deafening for the last several years when these things have gone, been going on, they're not new. You know, this stuff is not new. Say something about it, speak to it, call out injustice. That's number one, that's a big deal. Secondly let me, let me tell you a little story. Our church is primarily African American. You know, we have a handful of Anglos and other cultures and races ethnic race in our church. But when we were about three or 4,000 people, I made a decision [inaudible] filed church, that instead of us remaining a part of a primarily African-American denomination, I made a decision for our church to join an Anglo denomination. And I did that for several reasons, but here's one of the main reasons I did that. I did it because a lot of the people in our church lived through the Civil Rights era. They had the dogs put on them. They had the water hoses, they got locked up in jail. And they're thinking of white people, is that they're devils, they're demons. And a lot of this was done, you know, with the affirmation of the white church

who believed the same thing. You couldn't worship in some of these white churches, but I wanted our congregation to know that not all white people are demons.

And so I lined up with this denomination that I know and believe has wholesome, godly spiritual Anglos in it. So we made a step outside of our comfort zone and outside of the group of where we would be comfortable and engage with people that didn't look like us. And I would say the white churches and white leaders do the same, do the same. Denver Seminary came to Glen Arden, Maryland. That's not y'all normal environment, but y'all came to Glen Arden, Maryland, and established a site there if more, and you didn't do it as a mission. See the mistake that white churches make is they come to work with black people and treat us like we are missions. We're a mission. Like, you know, they they're coming to be a mission to us. No, no, no. What y'all have done is come and establish relationship. We engage relationally. It's not a mission that you're doing, and I love that. And I appreciate that. And I would say that to white organizations, cultivating relationships with people of color and people that don't look like you, go and have dinner with them. We've had dinner with you and your wife Priscilla, and we've laughed together. And we do things together. It's not just, it's a mission outreach for you. It's relational. And if more white would do that, the world would be a whole lot better place. So a lot of white Anglo organizations would do that. It would help ease the tension in our country. I'm sorry. I know I'm preaching. I'm doing all this talking, but that's my heart. Keep preaching.

Dr. Mark Young: Keep preaching.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Keep at it. You mentioned a little earlier Pastor Jenkins, the tragedy, we could say the travesty of people who will talk about the Gospel as if there is no place, as if there's no connection to justice in the Gospel. And I'd love to hear you follow up on that a little bit more in terms of what are times like these teaching us about the Gospel that maybe we we've been blind to? Maybe a lot of us have been blind to it. We're probably all susceptible in one way or another to a small or a one-dimensional gospel. And I have to believe that one of the outcomes of a time like this is that the church can have its breath taken away by the Gospel once again, when the Gospel has become domesticated.

Pastor Jenkins: Yeah. Yeah. I think when, even when Jesus did his ministry, if you saw a person was hungry, he fed them. Then he preached to them. If he saw a person sick, he healed them and then share truth with them. I mean that's, he laid down a model for us to do that. He gives us the example. And I think if people would just do the research of how people of color have been impacted historically as recent as the sixties and the seventies of how black people of color were treated, they would understand that you don't overcome that in a generation. You don't overcome the pain of discrimination. Yeah. I've worked in the federal government before I became a Pastor and I worked in the federal government for 10 years. So I've been at First Baptist for 30 years and 10 years before that. So we're talking about 40 years ago, I worked in the federal government and in

several offices in the federal government that I went to work in, I was the first black person to even work in the office, which I would go into these places, and I think to myself, how could I have been the first black person to work in this office? That means that they didn't entertain. They didn't hire, they didn't consider that there were any black people prior to, before me, who were qualified to work in that particular office. And I think that's probably replicated all over the country, of how black people were treated. And, you know, my father and my mother were restricted in jobs that they could hold. It was because of their color. I remember as a young man driving through the South, and there were certain restaurants, we couldn't go in certain bathrooms we had to use, we went to the movies and we had to sit in a certain section up in the balcony. We couldn't sit down on the lower level. These are things that are fresh in my mind. Like it happened yesterday, as a child. And I just would say it would, the Gospel breaks those chains. And we need Anglo people to understand they have a role to play in making those changes occur.

Dr. Mark Young: You know, Pastor, I remember as a boy going to revival meetings in our little church, we had two revivals a year, one in the Spring, one in the Fall. And you know, a hundred people in that church, we all got saved again or rededicated or something every Fall and Spring, and the preachers would call us to repent. So we had to repent of things like alcohol and sex outside of marriage. And occasionally somebody slip in dancing and playing with cards and other kinds of sins, never once do I remember an evangelist calling us to repent of racism and these really personal moral sins. But to have us think in terms of how has the people of God we needed to be revived and revitalized to speak out against him personally, work against something like racism. That was never a part of the message because we get this very individual, just spiritual view of salvation. That was a part of those messages.

Pastor Jenkins: Wow. Wow. But thank God somehow in your journey, Dr. Young, God has shifted your heart. And I want you to know how deeply I appreciate your heart and your service and your love our community. You've been a role model and I'm deeply grateful for it.

Dr. Don Payne: Pastor Jenkins, one last question I had for you. And I need to preface the question, I guess, with a bit of a disclaimer, because one thing I'm learning of late as a result of all the unrest and the egregious evil that has been perpetrated, I'm learning about whiteness, my own whiteness. How much, and I know I'm going to generalize here, but how much white people want not to feel badly about things. We have a very short shelf, or very short fuse for feeling disturbed about things. And of course, this is part of privilege is that we can exit the conversation whenever we want. We don't have to think about it, but I want to think about it. And then when we do, if we get too awfully disturbed, we're looking for hope. We're looking for answers. We're looking for relief really, really quickly. Now with that long disclaimer and caveat, is there anything you see in what's going on now? That's giving you a sense of hope, not just making us feel better, but do you see some indicators of hope?

Pastor Jenkins: I wish Dr. Payne that I could say, my answer is going to surprise you. I think I wish I could say that I saw hope in the white church, but I can't. Where I see hope, excuse me. Where I see on the streets, young people, blacks and whites and Asians and Hispanics marching together. They didn't embrace the racism of their parents. That's where I see Hope. I wish I could say I saw it in the church, but I don't. It's the young people who say, we're not going to embrace those values. My hope is with these young people who grew up with that, who didn't embrace these racist values, that's where I see hope. I wish I could say I saw in other places, but it's slow coming from the church, very slow. But the young people, they get it. My children went to a private school and they were, you know, a handful of, of the blacks that went to that school. But the school that they gone to and they've got white friends and when they went to college, all of the kids have gone to college. They inter-raced, into-mingled and fellowshipped and developed relationships. They don't have this racist perspective like their parents or grandparents did. And my hope is with these young people.

Dr. Don Payne: Isn't that interesting that that's where the hope is to be found, in the places church People might least be likely to, to see it or to locate it.

Pastor Jenkins: Yeah. I'm sorry for breaking down like that. Y'all forgive me.

Dr. Don Payne: That was powerful. Those were powerful words. Thank you for them, Mark any comments from you.

Dr. Mark Young: Well I just want to say Pastor, thank you for pointing our attention to the very, very thing that Denver Seminary exists to do, to be a part of that next generation and to be helping them understand broadly, deeply into the past and look toward the future. I would just say thank you for your commitment to Denver Seminary and commitment to helping young men and women get that training. That's going to help them. And my commitment, my pledge is that we're not going to allow this to become a side issue. We're going to make this, you keep it front and center, understand and better engage with those who don't struggle with the same histories that we have, so to speak, to step out as they lead ministries as well. So thank you for that, Pastor, your commitment to training younger men and women for ministry is exemplary.

Pastor Jenkins: Thank you, sir.

Dr. Mark Young: God bless you, brother.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, everybody listening. I hope you have been as moved as impacted by this as Dr. Young and I have. Pastor John Jenkins, we want to thank you deeply deeply again for the time with us today and as well for everything you are doing to help lead the church toward greater and deeper faithfulness to the Gospel, faithfulness to our Lord, Jesus Christ in the middle of a events that are, are so disruptive and dangerous and risky. And yet we are, we're praying for the redemptive power of the Gospel to be even more palpable for all of us than it

ever has before. So thank you again for that Pastor John Jenkins from First Baptist Church of Glenarden, Maryland. And if you ever happened to be in the DC area on a weekend, you got to go. I'm telling you, you got to go to First Baptist. Your weekend will be a failure if you do anything else. Friends this is Engage360 from Denver Seminary on behalf of Dr. Young, Pastor John Jenkins, and all of our production team. We're glad again, that you've chosen to spend a little bit of time with us. We hope you'll communicate with us. You can always reach us at our email address, which is podcast@denverseminary.edu. We hope you will give us a little rating or review on your favorite podcast platform. If anything you've heard has been helpful or any way beneficial to you. Until next time, may the Lord keep you moving forward into the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture. That's what we're all about. We want to keep pushing on that. Take care.