

Introduction: Welcome to Engage 360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the Gospel and the life changing truth of scripture at work in our culture today.

Dr. Don Payne: Hello again, this is Engage 360 from Denver Seminary. Thanks for joining us. I am Don Payne, your host. We are glad you're with us. And before we get started with this week's interview, I want to give a shout out to all of our staff here at Denver Seminary. And the reason for that is that these folks do more than meets the naked eye to make seminary education happen here at Denver Seminary. And they get very little praise at risk of, and inappropriate comparison. I want to compare them maybe to the offensive line on a football team. There would be no game without them, but they just don't get the recognition they deserve whether they're in our business office or IT or educational technologies or the library or the maintenance staff. These folks are our true heroes around here, and I want to thank them publicly for what they do. And in many cases, though, you could probably guess this in many cases these folks have skillsets that would allow them to do a lot better for themselves financially and other places than they do here. And we're especially grateful for that. I know they don't they don't necessarily do that because they think this is ministry and that's not, it's all ministry. That's one message we preach around here a lot but they've chosen to serve the Lord here and we're really grateful.

They have so shout out to all our staff at Denver seminary now to the topic for this week. There are some points of emphasis, some frequent points of emphasis these days in theological education and in the broader culture, those points of emphasis have to do with culture, cultural sensitivity, cultural adaptability, cultural awareness, multiculturalism, etcetera. And in our ever changing and rapidly changing world, those virtues those cultural virtues may be more important than ever. And many of us, I suspect know firsthand the benefits of immersion in cultures, other than our own we could go on for quite some time about how transformative and how crucial those experiences are. A few years ago, I had one of my most beneficial and surprising cross-cultural experiences. And that's the background for our conversation this week. Now this particular cross-cultural experience of mine was surprising because it's not the type of cross-cultural experience that most people I know would tend to put in that category of cross-cultural. It was in fact, an intensive course that I audited in rural ministry and our guest this week runs in overseas. That course his name is Ron Klassen, and Ron is the executive director of the Rural Home Missionary Association in Morton, Illinois. You can find them@rhma.org and get a lot more information about them. Ron, welcome to Engage 360.

Ron Klassen: Thank you. Good to see you again, Don.

Dr. Don Payne: It is good to see you as well. Ron, I think you are also the author. Are you not of No Small Places?

Ron Klassen: No Little Places. And also Leading Through Change; Shepherding the Town and Country Church in a New Era. So there's a couple of books out there.

Dr. Don Payne: Good. We may come back to those, and remind people of them. Ron, as we're recording this, Ron is on our campus for a couple of days to connect with students who may be interested in taking that course. Denver Seminary is one of several seminaries around the country who partner with RHMA to provide a really high quality credit-based course for rural ministry, which very few seminaries are able to do on their own. So we partner with RHMA for that, the course that he offers that they offer there. And he oversees is called the tact course, T A C T, which I think stands for Town and Country Training is that, do I have that right?

Ron Klassen: That's correct.

Dr. Don Payne: Town and Country Training, the tact course. And this is a one week intensive. That's about half a classroom-based work and half field immersions where it basically teaches people how to minister in rural environments. So I've got some specific questions about that, Ron, but tell us tell us a bit about RHMA, how you got started with them, and then the tact course in particular.

Ron Klassen: Well, RHMA's mission is to plant and strengthen churches in small towns across the US. So we have staff that are located in small towns all over the country. We have our home office in Morton, Illinois, where you came and took our tact class

Dr. Don Payne: Which, which by the way, it has to be the cleanest, most well-manicured small town I have ever seen. I don't know what the deal is. Did they have some kind of city regulation there, but I didn't see a single uncut ungroomed blade of grass in that whole town.

Ron Klassen: Yeah, there's, there's there used to be a reporter in nearby Peoria with the pure journal star that said that folks in Morton when their streets get dirty, they don't sweep them. They repave them. And he dared anybody to find any dandelions anybody's lawn and in our town. So it's kind of a perfectionistic community. Well I got involved in rural ministry very unexpectedly. I grew up in Phoenix. I grew up in a mega church. Rural ministry was not Ron's wonderful plan for his life, but when I got to my last year of seminary and I knew I wanted to head into pastoral ministry, I was thinking city church, maybe number five guy on a five member staff or something. But I found out that virtually all the opportunities for new graduates that are looking for pastorates were out in smaller communities and smaller churches. And so we ended up in rural Nebraska, and that was the beginning of what's now been more than 30 years of rural ministry along the way we found out that we love rural people. We love the culture and the Lord gave us a real heart for the spiritual needs that we saw out there in rural America.

Dr. Don Payne: What's the history of RHMA?

Ron Klassen: So RHMA was founded in 1942. And it was founded by a man in central Illinois who saw that rural places were being neglected because there was a huge movement of people to the cities. This was kind of the world war II era and manufacturing at all was really ramping up in the cities. And he saw that a lot of rural places were being forgotten and you know, that's really been true even through the years which makes it more important than ever, maybe for RHMA to be focused on rural communities.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. I have to tell you, I think I've told you this before, but in the years that we have been associated with RHMA and the tact course we've had we've had quite a number of students, at least by my count take the tact course and to a person I have received nothing but the highest praise for that. In fact, in a couple of cases, I can recall students here who actually grew up on farms and thought they knew it all, but took the course for whatever reasons and then came back and were quite surprised at what they learned, because while much that they had experienced was familiar to them, experientially, they never had any language for it or any concepts for it. And they were surprised to find what a, what a deep, insignificant learning experience it was for them even having grown up rural.

Ron Klassen: Oh, very glad to hear you say that. And, and yes. I mean, sometimes when you grow up in a place, you don't necessarily take a step back, and study that place. You just kind of take a lot of things for granted because it's, what's familiar to you, so that's helpful, but it's also helpful to understand that there are so many different kinds of rural communities out there today. So that even if you're from a rural community and you're going to go and minister in a rural community, it could actually be a cross-cultural experience, very different from what you were raised in.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. I want you to talk more about that because with many of the sociological shifts that we're seeing particularly in the last few decades, rural is not rural, is not rural. So what are some of those different types of rural that you're aware of now?

Ron Klassen: Yeah, stereotypically, we think of rural as being farms and, and animals, and certainly that's very much a key part of rural America today, but it might interest our listeners too, to know that about 94% of the rural labor force today is nonagricultural in nature. So, there are lots of people that have moved into rural America in recent years, they call it the rural rebound, rural Renaissance, and you have different ethnicities. You have people are moving to rural America for lots of different reasons. And so we actually like to use the word rurals, almost plural because there are, there's so much diversity out there. I think of right where I live in Central Illinois, we talked about our community being kind of a perfectionistic bedroom community, 15 minutes away blue collar community, very different, a few minutes from there is a medical community, one of the most unique, small towns that I've ever been in.

Dr. Don Payne: I remember going there.

Ron Klassen: 850 people. People regularly pass our huge hospital in Peoria and go to the hospital in that community because it's just got an incredible reputation. Three miles down the road from there as an elevator town, grain elevator, right. Smack dab in the middle of town, go a few minutes from there, college town. It's actually the college home of President, Ronald Reagan. There's a tourist town cause we live along the river. There's a prison town close by. Everything I've just mentioned is less than 30 minutes from where I live. So that says something about the diversity that you see in rural America today.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. And many of the ministry problems, many of the social problems are quite similar. Are they not, to what is found in the larger cities?

Ron Klassen: Absolutely. One of the one of the things that's happening, trends that's happening is that we call them the new rural poor are actually moving into many rural communities. These are essentially inner city, poor who desperately want to relocate probably for their family's sake and they're incentives, the government offers to do that. And so they've relocated in a lot of rural communities across the country. So that brings the city into rural communities. But even beyond that there are many similarities many indicators of spiritual problems and challenges among rural people that maybe wasn't so much the case years ago. I think, this was one of the big shocks for me when I moved to rural, I kind of had this view of rural being Mayberry and kind of thought sin kind of a little bit tongue and cheek, ends at the city limits. And it's kind of, you know, just Norman Rockwallek out there in rural country. But really that's not true. So many statistics from substance abuse alcohol abuse, three times among rural young people you see in their city counterparts.

Just about every family disintegration statistic is at least as bad if not worse in rural America. The suicide rate among farmers for many years was second of all job classifications, really just a few months ago, it entered, it became number one. So there's a lot of despair among certain people in rural communities. Just a lot of indicators of spiritual need. Certainly the statistics of how many attend church or identify with a church, closely mirror what you would see in the city. One of the shocks for Roxy and me when we moved out to rural America from the city years ago, we found that there was, there were many communities around the country that lacked a vibrant Gospel proclaiming Bible teaching church. We could look up and down the road from where we were in Nebraska and name community after community. And all of that was shocking to us because we were well aware of the spiritual needs in the city, but we just had a whole different picture of what it was like out there in rural communities.

Dr. Don Payne: I gather that many of the seminary students who go to take the Tact course, at least the majority probably are not from rural environments. They are people who have spent most of their time in larger cities. And I know we have to generalize pretty grossly here to even talk about cities because that's not any one thing, but many of the people who take the Tact course and who may eventually find themselves in some rural environment for their ministry, do not have that as their background. So when they come to take the Tact course and

they do the immersion what patterns, I'm curious, what patterns have you seen about the biggest surprises they have when they enter, when they really learn, not just drive through a rural environment?

Ron Klassen:

Yeah. Well, you are correct that a number of our students are not from rural communities and the truth is that about half of new grads from seminaries, like Denver that go into smaller communities are not from rural or small towns they're from city backgrounds. So certainly I would say one of the biggest surprises to them is how cross-cultural ministry is, even though you might say, well, this is America, and you might say they speak English, and who knows what you might be thinking, but yet it's very cross-cultural. And I know that that was, that was a real surprise for, for Roxy and me. When we moved out there, we found people that just their thought processes are different. They dress different. We found that our wardrobe now qualified for what not to wear on TV, that TV program. We found that even language was different. It's true they spoke English, but how they used words, and just all kinds of language out there that we had no idea what they were talking about. We found that of course their work was way different than what we were accustomed to. I remember when we were there just a few days and a rancher invited me to come out and work cattle with him. Well, I had no idea what that meant. Probably one of the hardest things was recreation. They played different than what we did and you'd think, well, that can't be that hard, can it?

But, you know, when it gets to that level where you can't even recreate in ways that are familiar to you for them, it was maybe rodeoing on a Sunday afternoon or going out and shooting clay pigeons. And I'd never done any of those kinds of things. And just some of their mannerisms things. I had a guy come up to me from our church neat guy, but we'd been there a couple of weeks and he said, how come you don't wave to me when we pass each other on the road? Well, in Phoenix, we never, we never waived at each other. And even something as simple as a use of a car horn, you know, why do you use a car horn here in Denver? You're probably mad at somebody. Well a use of a car horn in rural communities as a friendly gesture greeting, you know, to somebody that you're passing on the road. And you think, wow, that's 180 degrees difference. One's friendly and the other's anger and it's the same horn. And that's such a good image of how I think ministry sometimes in rural places should maybe be approached almost 180 degrees different from what you might find in a city. And in no way, is that disparaging how you do ministry in the city is just saying we're in a different culture. And that's a real adjustment I think for our students to kind of get their arms around.

Dr. Don Payne:

Well, one, and I'm kind of a small town, but I did not grow up rural, but grew up in small towns. And so some of what I experienced was kind of vaguely familiar to me, but I had never really thought about it the way y'all helped me think about that during the course. And one of the reasons I came away from the Tact course, really convinced and impressed with what a valuable cross-cultural training it was, is kind of in keeping with what you already mentioned. And that is that you can go into that, not really thinking it's going to be all that cross-

cultural, where you might, you know, we might go to another country, go abroad somewhere and be expecting to, to have some of our sensibilities go haywire. But because we've been briefed on that and we expect that cross-cultural experience to really go at cross purposes with a lot of our intuitions, but you go into rural America and you're not really expecting that kind of thing to happen. And then you're shocked at how really, really different it is if your sensibilities have been conditioned by city life.

Ron Klassen:

Exactly. And as all that's happening, if, if you, it would have helped me immensely, if somebody, somewhere along the way before I went into a rural community would have just said, this is going to be, cross-cultural. Expect it. And it'll be okay, you're going to be able to work through it. And when you get to the other side, you're actually going to be comfortable in your new culture. It would've been helpful if somebody would have said that to me. And, but nobody did. And consequently, I went into culture shock which you would kind of expect maybe a missionary to do if you go overseas somewhere. But and I didn't even really know it for what it was. I just, it was beyond my understanding. I couldn't hardly put my arms around what was going on with me. And it would have been just helpful to have a little bit of cross cultural training. And I would've just been comforted to know this is normal. This is what happens when you go into a new ministry like this, it's going to be okay, don't worry about it. Just kind of relax, and learn your culture.

And if people laugh at you because you do something kind of crazy because you don't understand your culture, just laugh with them. It's okay. They're not making fun of you. It's going to be okay. And the other side of it is sadly cultural arrogance can set in where you, you have, or may I should speak for myself. I had kind of a perspective of, wow, these people really need to learn how to do things correctly. Aren't they fortunate that I'm here to show them how to do it, right. And kind of speak and relate to them from air of superiority. And that's not helpful when you go into a ministry. What we have to realize is that there are different ways to do ministry, different ways to have impact in ministry. And it's not necessarily our job to go and try to change a lot of things, but maybe to try to work within the cultural mores as they are.

Dr. Don Payne:

I'm really glad you mentioned that because I've noticed that for quite a number of years, that because so many of our resources and media that are ministry related come out of more you know, the larger city urbanized environments. There is a, maybe a subtle, but a very real condescension of sorts. And it's struck me that provincialism or small mindedness really runs both ways. It runs both ways. Some of those who, at least I've interacted with whose worldview and sensibilities have only been shaped by large city life can have sometimes just as narrow of you or a constricted view of the world as somebody in a who's growing up in the country.

Ron Klassen:

Exactly. And it can end up being a collision course. I was very fortunate. I had a church that was very patient with me, forgiving. They were kind of laid back and kind of let me make some mistakes. And I really appreciated that. But

sometimes that doesn't happen and it doesn't end well, it ends unfortunately, and it doesn't end well. And sometimes Pastors leave kind of shaking their head. Like maybe I'm not cut out for being a Pastor. Maybe I just got it all wrong here with God's calling on my life. And just some simple cross-cultural training I think could have made all the difference in the world. Yeah. I mean, we expect this with missionaries and when you think about it, we provide specialized training for certainly missionaries, but we have youth ministry tracks. We have inner city tracks, we have outdoor ministry tracks. Doesn't it make sense to have at least a course out there that is available for, what's likely to be the first ministry for many graduates going into the pastorate.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Well, again, that's why I'm so excited about what y'all are doing with the tact course through RHMA and you just do a stellar job of it. And that's one of the reasons I wanted to talk with you on the podcast too, is to get that a little bit of profile and for the listeners anywhere, whether you're connected with Denver Seminary or any seminary, if you know, anybody who could benefit from the kind of resources that RHMA is offering through the Tact course. And I think you have some other courses as well, some more advanced courses by all means, look, refer them to RHMA and avail yourself of those.

Ron Klassen: Or go directly. You can certainly go to RHMA.org, that's our website, and that'll link you to our Tact program, but you can also go to Tactprogram.org. We have a whole website just dedicated to this program.

Dr. Don Payne: Good, good. Ron, what do you find most interesting about rural ministry?

Ron Klassen: Speaking for myself, and maybe it's not so much a strictly rural, but just remote and small population which could happen with missionaries that maybe go to a remote tribe somewhere, halfway around the world. I think what has been so intriguing to me is that there's the real possibility. And I'd even like to say likelihood that one can have at least as great of impact and influence in a small place as you can have in a much bigger place. I think it's very tempting or very natural to think, well, why would you go to a little place when you can go to the city and you can reach thousands of people for Christ?

Dr. Don Payne: Hence the name of your book. There are No Little Places?

Ron Klassen: No Little Places, right? Yeah. I think even our Lord people were kind of baffled in his day. He we're, we're told in Luke chapter 13 that as he was making his way towards Jerusalem, he stopped along the way and talked and people in the small towns and in the countryside. And in that context, somebody who was probably questioning his ministry strategy, asked the question. So Lord are only a few people going to be saved? Like why don't we hurry up and get to Jerusalem where all the people are, you know, and it's easy, I had that kind of perspective and it's easy to go there. But something that I've realized is that how many people are there in cities that know, or that win thousands of people to Christ or even know thousands of people. Most Pastors, missionaries, whatever ministry workers in cities that I know would be fortunate to know,

even a thousand people in a city of maybe millions. Well, what's the difference between maybe having influence on thousand people in the city versus maybe having influence on a thousand people in a small town?

Dr. Don Payne: We all have a certain relational capacity. Now we get our circles of influence and stay within those. Okay.

Ron Klassen: And I would even argue that in a small town, you have more potential to have influence among those thousand because you're living in a context of social intimacy. So you're in community with each other. You're living life, you're rubbing shoulders with each other. You're speaking into each other's lives, day in and day out. And so like, if I'm a pastor say in a city and I go into a restaurant, I got an appointment with somebody, the only person who knows me as the guy sitting across the table from me, if I go to a restaurant or a cafe in a small town, and I enter a cafe and I'm the Pastor, everybody knows me. And I have the opportunity to go from table to table and have influence on that entire cafe because I'm in a context of social intimacy. And I have time and time again seen Pastors and others who are doing ministry in small places, have what I think is actually greater influence and greater impact perhaps than many that are serving in city context. So it's not limiting is what I want to say, necessarily it's really not limiting to go to more remote and smaller population. God may use you just as much there, if not more, as in other places.

Dr. Don Payne: I think it was when I was in Morton that I heard somebody, maybe you or one of your associates say, we're not in the middle of nowhere, we're in the middle of everywhere, did I hear that from you?

Ron Klassen: Yeah, actually, well, actually one of our board members of RHMA who is a Pastor who has a church out in what many people would say is nowhere. He liked to say, I'm not in the middle of nowhere, I'm in the middle of everywhere. And over time he had people coming to his church from, I think he said like more than 20 outlying communities and he's out there in the middle of a cornfield with his church. So it's amazing. And another way to look at it is it's not nowhere, it's somewhere. If there are people there whom God loves. And so we try to gently correct language when people use the phrase, oh, you're out in the middle of nowhere. And we say, this is somewhere.

Dr. Don Payne: Yes. It is. And we're special. Yeah. For sure. For people who are thinking of hearing this, thinking about this in terms of their own possible future ministry, maybe seminary students or others apart from what you guys do in the Tact course, what are some of the personal qualities traits that people ought to be intentionally developing in order to be able to serve well in that type of environment?

Ron Klassen: Yeah. That's a great question. I think it's something that really needs to be given careful attention to I would, I would say several things. One is just having a good attitude. I think of RHMA church planter years ago, they grew up in the Pacific Northwest beautiful mountains trees, and they moved to an impoverished small

town in the middle of the Arizona desert. And they years later were telling me, we decided that we were going to like it there, even if we didn't. And I think that's powerful. So just having a good attitude about where you're going, I think is so key. I think unconditionally loving people, respecting people who are different from us is really important. If we don't, people will pick up on that really quickly. I think a willingness to give up, we may have to give up some of our cultural norms. We may need to give up you know, some of the amenities of life, a lot of small towns don't have Starbucks anywhere close or something like that.

So, there are things that we have to be willing to give up. People sometimes on the same wavelength as you. I mean, sometimes you, you think, wow, that's tough not to have anybody that's on the same wavelength. So we just have to be willing to give up some things, a willingness to adapt is really, really key. We can't expect people in our community to adapt to who we are. We have to be willing to adapt to who they are. And then I think just being teachable having humility people love to teach. And when we go into communities, it's just wonderful to ask questions of people who live there get to know them and how they think, and why they do things the way they do and that sort of thing. And not just go in with the attitude of I'm here to teach you, which we are, we're there to teach and preach the word of God, but that we have a lot to learn. So go in there as learners as well.

Dr. Don Payne:

I got a good dose of that when I was at [inaudible] the Tact course some years ago, and I really appreciated those field trips or immersions you took us on. And I remember standing on, on one guy's farm with, in a circle with the students and with a number of people from the community local, I think there was a corn crop farmer, a pig farmer, and maybe a few others. And I was just deeply moved by how these how these guys spoke about what they did for a living and how thoughtful they were about it from a sort of stewardship perspective. They thought deeply about the land. They thought deeply about what they, what they put in the land. And I remember one of the guys, I don't recall his name, but I remember him saying I inherited this farm from my father. I intended to pass to pass it onto my children, and I want to leave this, this soil in better condition than I received it. And he was not an organic farmer. He was a conventional commercial farmer, but he thought deeply and carefully about what he did with that land, because he knew it was a gift and he wanted to pass it on better than he received it. And I was very touched by that.

Ron Klassen:

Yeah. Farmers who are believers take very seriously stewardship of the land. And they're mindful also probably better than most that they're not in control of a lot of things in their lives. And the truth is that we're not even in the cities either. But they know that a lot of what they do maybe worthless when all gets said and done, because you could have weather impact, you could have one hail storm, some crisis oversees that impacts the markets and on and on you go. And so I'm just enormously impressed by their faith and how they just trust the sovereignty of God, time and time again with their work and with their perspective on what they do day in and day out.

Dr. Don Payne: They are teaching.

Ron Klassen: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah.

Dr. Don Payne: Ron, give us maybe a couple of good resources people can go to whether they're other groups or other good books like your own that they could go to learn more about what was going on in rural ministry.

Ron Klassen: There is something happening in rural ministry today is incredibly encouraging in the last few years. I think folks have woke up to a world out there. That's really, probably not too far away from most where most everybody lives. And so there actually been a number of good books that have been written just in the last five years. You can find those books on RHMA's website. We have a list of them just click on resources and you'll find them there. There are a number of ministry organizations that have been launched just in the last five years. Gospel Coalition does a lot with rural ministry. Acts 29 has their rural arm, Rural Matters Institute at the Billy Graham center with Ed Stetser just been launched. I just spent some time with Ed just last week. There's a number of things, things happening there is an that's happening. And I am so excited. I've been in rural ministry for 30 years. I've not seen anything like what I'm seeing in the last, even two to three years. And I just have a real sense of anticipation what's God's going to do to these largely forgotten people right in our own backyard.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. That's great, Ron, thanks so much.

Ron Klassen: Oh, thank you. I've enjoyed this so much.

Dr. Don Payne: This has been great to have you here, we've been visiting with Ron Klassen executive director of the Rural Home Missionary Association in Morton, Illinois, and oversee of the Tact program courses. And we want to commend those to you and those resources to you hope this has been an encouragement, enlightenment benefit. If this or, or anything else you find on Engage 360 has been beneficial to you, or if you think it might be beneficial for somebody, you know, please tell them about us tweet it or put it on your Instagram or Facebook or something, but please let them know. So we can serve even more people hopefully as we're serving you and please communicate with us as well. You can email us podcast@denverseminary.edu. We would love to hear from you. Please give us a rating or review on your podcast platform. If you don't mind taking just a moment to do that. Hey, for all of our production team here at Denver Seminary and to especially Sean Truman, who's on our team and is on the boards today. I want to give a word of thanks to them, and thanks to you for listening from everybody here at Denver Seminary, I'm Don Payne. And we hope to talk to you again next week. Take care.