

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: Come back to Engage360 at Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne, your host. We're grateful you're spending some time with us. If you have been listening to Engage360 and have subscribed to Engage360 for any length of time, you'll know that we've produced weekly episodes over the last year and a half. And we want to let you know that as we head into the holidays this year, we'll be adjusting our weekly release schedule and adopting a new, somewhat less frequent cadence in this next season. If you'd like to stay up to date on when the new episodes drop, make sure that you're subscribed on Apple podcasts or whatever other platform you might use, and you can always follow along on our Facebook, our Instagram or Twitter platforms for announcements and content about new episodes. This revised cadence or rhythm for Engage360 is going to allow us to run some episodes a little bit longer and get some wider exposure to those.

So, we're hopeful that this will be beneficial to you now, a few episodes back, we had the privilege of interacting with one of our doctor of ministry students, John Allen, who has a fascinating story and set of experiences. John spent about 17 years, I think in South Africa serving Bible occasionally as head of security for the peace Corps and as pastor of an international church in Pretoria. And John is back in the States now still overseeing security for the Peace Corps internationally and in some capacities also providing leadership for the congregation in Pretoria as well as one in Congo, I believe. And so I'd encourage you to go back if you have not heard his previous interview, go back and listen to episode 57 and you'll get the fuller story. But we've asked John back for kind of a part two conversation because in that first interaction, he made reference to some subjects that are so thick that we need to explore them further, do a bit of a deeper dive. John, welcome back to Engage360.

John Allen: Well, thanks Dr. Payne for having me.

Dr. Don Payne: We are, yeah, we're really, really grateful you could carve out some time for us. John is joining us from the, from Maryland, but the Washington DC area. Okay. John, I'm going to assume that everybody has listened to our previous conversation and again, encourage them to do so if they haven't. But in that conversation, you mentioned that one of the things you learned from your years in the African continent is that Africans have the ability to have the hard conversations. I remember that comment you made because we were, you and I were talking about what we in the US need to learn from them, particularly when we in our country here are in such a time of division and turmoil. So you said Africans have the ability to have the hard conversations. So I want you to tell us more about that. What did that look like?

John Allen: Well thanks Dr. Payne for the question, I do say I was in Africa serving and ministry working for a number of years, and I had an opportunity to not only

serve as a pastor and minister to the congregation and get to know that congregation, but in my full-time work with the volunteer organization in which I was a part of, I had an opportunity to travel extensively throughout the continent, getting to know people in a very sort of intimate personal way. And with that being said, I was just really taken away by their level of resiliency and their ability to be able to call things out. And in a sense, do the heavy lift or the hard work toward reconciliation.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. And as anybody who keeps up with international affairs at all would know there's some difficult stuff that keeps going on in a number of the African countries, lots of conflict, civil war, tribalism, lots of stuff that, I mean, this is not petty or trivial conversation, right?

John Allen: That is correct. I mean, I can count just numerous incidents that happened during my tenure there as pastor of the congregation that I was tasked to serve. There was, there was always, and I hate to use the word always, maybe I should say periodic, yeah, there were clashes and incidents in the country of South Africa alone, where you have this sort of melting pot from the diaspora of people who have migrated to that area for a better living conditions, and educational opportunities, both for themselves and their children. Only to be told that because of your presence, you're taking away jobs that belong to South Africans. So, I often had to kind of set the tone with our congregation as it related to what was going on outside of those doors, many of those individuals in our congregation were directly impacted by xenophobic backlash or violence.

There were situations congregants would come forward and share what was going on in their own countries. I mean, you alluded to that earlier. Some came with a lot of baggage. They were in South Africa as refugees. I recall situations where I had individuals from Zimbabwe and it was during a period of time where at the time was doing a huge farm grab land grab. And many of the Zimbabweans were fled to South Africa for refuge and the same in the Congo. And I can give other examples, so privileged to be able to lead a multinational multicultural congregation and gave us a up-close view of what was really happening in the lives of the congregants.

Dr. Don Payne: I know that hard conversations always have a cultural form to them. Every culture has its own way of having certain conversations. But I'm curious what that looked like even though in South Africa, particularly in such an international environment where you had folks from other African countries coming for refuge, and they're bringing their own cultures into that culture, how did you navigate those conversations? What did they look like?

John Allen: Yeah, that's a very good question. You know, at times we would have situations that, there would be no obvious outward, maybe discomfort of the tension that would exist between the various groups. And that kind of spoke to the cultural norms. In Africa, we are there's a tendency to be conflict averse or conflict avoidance. But it pushed me to, in a sense, hear more from individuals. I gave an example in our last exchange Dr. Payne regarding what was going on in Rwanda,

the Hutu culture, they were going through their own genocide. And one of the, sort of in a sense of... I messaged a guy from one of the Hutu members and families of our church. And this gives an example of how you could miss it, you know, because there's no outward showing. But when I asked this individual who was from Rwanda, which tried to volunteer, and I refer him saying because he was very active in the music ministry of the church, he says, Pastor, the Hutu culture.

And when he said that he expressed some level of embarrassment and he wanted to make it clear of what his position was and his role, or lack of role. And so it was a conviction to me to get back to your question, it was a conviction to me as a leader and as a pastor to pay close attention and be on the lookout for you know, potential conflict or unease that might exist under the surface. And I can give other examples of how we were able to detect that and to navigate that. But, it really does it push you to a point where you want to listen and some of those unspoken and can I use that phrase, outward expressions of discomfort that might be a connection to the tension that exists.

Dr. Don Payne:

Yeah. I think we'll want to hear one or two of those stories to really you know, put some flesh on that for ourselves and help us maybe translate that into some things we're dealing with here in this culture, but I can hardly imagine, you know, when you mentioned that in our first interview that you had from Rwanda, Hutus and Tutsis, both coming into your congregation, that's hard for us to fathom. I mean, for anybody who knows anything about the Rwandan genocide, just that an unspeakable slaughter that took place in, was that the early mid-nineties, how in the world, what in the world was that like for you to sit and listen to their stories? When you've got believers in the same church from these two tribes who were, who were at each other like that? What was that like?

John Allen:

It was an adjustment for me. I had never Pastored a multinational, multicultural congregation. It pushed me to places that I didn't know existed within me. Give me an example of a story by one of the Tutsi women in our church. And I won't give her a real name. She sort of pushed this genocide to the forefront. It was one thing for me to ask about the musician, who was part of the Hutu tribe and get his information. But, I think it was the Tutsi who was the part of the minority in Rwanda, who faced the blunt of that genocide, as you, as you kind of alluded to earlier, back in 1994, over a period of about a hundred days. 800,000 to a million Tutsi's and others sympathizers were, were slaughtered, mutilated in public. It was just a tremendous situation, but this particular woman that I wanted to raise her story, she was married to a Hutu. And in anticipation of his death or his murder during this genocide, her husband gave control of his assets to his family.

And he implored to them to look after his family in the event of his yeah, well, after Marie's husband's death, the in-laws, they abandoned support, and they banished her as a widow and her two children from the family home, she suffered sexual assaults, physical violence. She was left for dead and she

survived, and she migrated with her, her children eventually ending up in the refugee community in South Africa and subsequently she became a part of our congregation. But to get to your question about how the youth navigate that space, I must say that I think it starts with humility and empathy just being able to humble yourself to a space and place where you're able to at least listen. And, you know, there's always a tendency to say in a sense that suffering your suffering is worse than mine, you know, that type of thing, you know when people have that and see but I concluded that suffering and oppression is personal and not to be ranked or compared from person to person. And when I heard her story, it brought me in and I could give you know, just the kind of support that we were able to provide her and her children while in South Africa.

It was complex you know, navigating these two tribes and addressing their issues. But we tried to set a platform that was able to minister to their untreated trauma because there's trauma on both sides. And so we tried to set a tone and an atmosphere for the congregation to be open to each other's pain. And each of us suffering, I'll give you an example. And I don't know if I'm talking too much here, but I would like to give you an example with Marie, the Tutsi, who was married to a Hutu, and migrated to South Africa after her husband was murdered. In our congregation, we saw this one particular Emily from the Tutsi tribe, again, faced the brunt of the genocide. We watched that couple, that family within our congregation and that mother suffered mental illness due to her untreated trauma. There were times that we see things being triggered, and it was easy for folks within our congregation to say, wow, there's something wrong with that woman. And to isolated and create distance, but it was through a women's fellowship and my wife knew the full story of this woman, and she was ministering in a women's fellowship group with the church.

And she shared Marie's story of what she had gone through, her suffering sexual assault, physical violence, her desire, just to survive. And when people heard the Marie's story, other individuals, especially women within the congregation could both empathize, they could relate, and they start to share their stories of how they had overcome different traumatic events, different twists and turns in their own lives. And, and what an opportunity for that congregation at a deeper level to embrace this particular tribe, but all tribes, but this particular tribe who had faced so much violence and suffering in their history.

Dr. Don Payne:

Right. You know, when you, when you hear, when any of us hear stories like that, that are so riveting, so visceral, it really does have a tendency to, to put our own stuff in perspective, and to give us a measure of freedom to let some of that stuff be known so that it can be addressed, and healed and accepted. And, that's one of the benefits of that kind of experience that you've described, you know, what you've shared, John kind of naturally raises this subject of forgiveness. And I want to explore that with you for just a bit, because I'm going to make kind of a general observation here about Christianity in the US, or at least the Christianity that I'm most familiar with here in the US. When we talk about a theme like forgiveness, which is so prominent biblically, and our Lord Jesus makes such a big deal of that. Sometimes it's easy to think about

forgiveness as a simple onetime light switch on, off switch affair. You know, you just kind of tripped the switch, you just forgive and you go on and it's like nothing ever happened. I, I pick up vibes quite often that that's what many people expect forgiveness to be this simplistic sort of one or two dimensional thing where you just, you just do it and then you move on and everything's okay. But what you're describing, is so morally and existentially dense that I can hardly imagine what the process is like four Hutus and Tutsis to give and receive forgiveness. How did you talk to us about that? What did you learn about forgiveness?

John Allen: Well, you know, that's a question with a lot of depth to my response. I hope you know, one thing, I come to know is that true forgiveness happens. And when it happens, it's not rushed. It's not rehearsed. It is usually as a result of some meaningful, honest discourse. And it's more likely to be lasting when it's taken from that particular perspective, when it's not rushed or cohoused, you know, people on both sides of the conflict who submit to the full process, you know, of expressing and listening and allowing themselves to remain in that discomfort that comes with that. They are ultimately, you know, more able to enter into a relationship as opposed to just existing in the same space.

Dr. Don Payne: That's crucial.

John Allen: You know, and it's easy to say too, and it's, but it's beautiful to, to observe. And I think that's been my takeaway in ministering cross-culturally. I know that you know, I always, and excuse me for being a Pastor who didn't have it. Right. you know, I thought,

Dr. Don Payne: You know, you know you're the only Pastor who had, who didn't get it right, right?

John Allen: I mean, I've taught the prayer, you know, the Lord's prayer, you know, forgiving others, you know trust, what have you, as the Lord forgives us. And I hold that forgiveness 70 times 70, you know, that type of thing. But, but I must say, I thought that forgiveness, everybody was owed forgiveness, and that's a misconception that I had, that everybody is owed forgiveness. Sometimes we forget that forgiveness is a gift. And that if you don't mind me saying this, Dr. Payne, I also thought that forgiveness is unconditional. And I grew up where, you know, it's just unconditional, forgiveness is unconditional, but recipients of it. The folks who are offended, the person who've been wronged, sometimes they need to hear acknowledgement and, and sorrow from the perpetrator or, or even others. And I mean, even in our own history, as you were describing earlier in the US history of enslavement discriminating against black Americans, you know people need to know that they are hurt and their suffering is validated, and that it's named, and there's not a rush to get through it. And, you know, I could even talk about the witnesses and the bystanders. They also have a right to ask the victim about their stance on forgiveness.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. I think this is a perfect example of why we, and the body of Christ overall, both here and in other places need to have the patients to attend to this conversation with a lot of nuance and maybe some discomfort, because if I'm right in my previous thought that that forgiveness tends in many settings to be trivialized, to be kind of a superficial thing, we can superficialize it, if that's a word in a lot of different ways by saying, for example, well, just let it go. Just forget about it, but that doesn't own it. I mean, to your point I mean, the terms we use here can get a little slippery sometimes, because it seems like the Scripture calls us to be willing to extend forgiveness, but to your point for a genuine reconciliation to take place, there has to be that reciprocity, right.

John Allen: That's correct.

Dr. Don Payne: There's got to be that ownership that naming that of, of the wrong. So even if unilaterally forgiveness is extended, or if it's offered, it's got to be, it's got to be picked up. It's got to be named and, or the, the issue has to be named and owned. And that's not a simple one time thing, is it? That's, I'm not trying to, I don't mean to put words in your mouth here, but that's that that's deep work, that's hard work, that's patient work. And for those who, particularly those, whether it's here in the US you know, with enslavement, or it's like Hutus and Tutsis to simply say to somebody, well, let's just forget it and move on that glosses, and almost what's the word, it really trivializes and diminishes the significance of the wrong that was done.

John Allen: I agree. Wholeheartedly. I know that in order for that forgiveness, you know, to take place, some level of truth telling must take place before reconciliation.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. All of this reminds me of something that's so central to our mission, our ethos here at Denver Seminary. If you look at our mission statement, one of the central phrases is the redemptive power of the gospel, and that's a great phrase. I'm committed to it. We are committed to it, but when you put something like that in a mission statement, and it can roll off your lips so glibly, I think it's easy for us to lose the measurement of what really is involved in that, the redemptive power of the gospel. And in situations like you lived through there in South Africa, that's a, that's a stage on which you really get to see that played out in full force, the redemptive power of the gospel. And sometimes, I mean, I would expect sometimes that's kind of gritty messy work to see the gospel powerfully redeem. Is that fair? Is that a fair way to put it?

John Allen: Oh, I agree. I agree wholeheartedly. I while I can give so many examples of that, it's gritty, it's dirty. It's not clean to the eyes. I'll go back to the Rwandan, you know, young woman that I described earlier, who had survived the genocide only to suffer illness and untreated trauma, there were times in our congregation, where she would face this sort of xenophobic backlash from South Africans. And I remember that after a couple of weeks, she had gone missing they had burned her flat or apartment due to xenophobic violence. And so someone in our congregation made us aware of that and her children came to me say, Hey, mama is missing. And she's been missing and to find out, you

know, when you're talking about the redemptive gospel, we took a copy of her passport. We enlarged the photo. We went to the police station that would not give that Tutsi Rwandan family any respect, any service and looking for a mother who had been missing for a number of days. And to be able to go into that situation alone with others with a sense of looking out for the least and saying, Hey, look, this person has been missing.

Here's a photo, here's a wanted poster that we've put together on her behalf and mobilizing that police chief and others within his station to be able to find this mother was suffering for a long period of time back to safety. So that's just one aspect of it, and I could go deeper, but I'm trying to paint a picture of the gospel going outside of the walls of our sanctuary, outside of where we worship to where people are in their mental state, in their lost state, in dealing with the society, the culture and how they are viewed, and coming up with a remedy of how this person can be redeemed, but I can get a great story about this woman, but I'm kind of going in that direction.

Dr. Don Payne:

That is a beautiful enactment of the gospel where we're on behalf of the Lord, you pursued one who was, in this case, literally lost that. That takes that phrase, the redemptive power of the gospel out of the easy vocabulary of the sanctuary and puts it on the street. It's that, that's why I call it an enactment or an embodiment of the gospel, which is far more difficult. Isn't it than just talking about the gospel, you know, in cultures where where some of that may not be quite as much in our face as it was there for you. It's really easy, maybe all too easy, dangerously easy for us to be verbally eloquent about the gospel, but never, never really have to enact it in a serious way. And all the while think we know the gospel, just because we're able to verbalize it very crisply. Wow. Well, you know, I think John, I think one of the carry over or crossover points for all of this is that, you know, in that situation, you face those probably multiple situations you faced in South Africa, you were dealing with the enactment of the gospel, the redemptive power of the gospel, forgiveness, the difficult work of forgiveness, where there were clear winners and losers.

We're not talking about trivial, trivial matters here. There were winners and losers. And the gospel is, was the only thing that really could bind those folks together in one body in Christ, through forgiveness when some, some are winners and some were losers. So as we're having this conversation right now we're in a situation in our country just after our national election, where at least at some point things will be settled, at least as we're recording this, I guess that's still a bit in question. And in some circles there's going to be winners and losers. Won't be won't be a contentious campaign as to who's going to win. There's going to be winners and losers. And I suspect that the body of Christ is going to have to in this country at our own level, have to work through some of those same issues that you've so graphically described for us. What do you think carries over? What do we have to learn from all this here in the US?

John Allen:

Well, I mean, there are a number of things that I, you know, would say that in almost every story, you know, there there's the villains who formed some

combination of being the perpetrators to the enablers, or just apathetic. And then there are also those who are heroes who come in the form of resisters and helpers and healers. But at the end of the day, we were all fearfully and wonderfully made, our identity, you know, as believers. Rest in Christ and look the beauty of the body of Christ. It's diverse, there's a range of opinions. And, you know, every perspective has impact, but at the end of the day, we are who we are in Christ. And to remember the love that we should show and the initiative that we should take to be that, you know that's not always, that's not always easy. That's sort of not learned in ministering cross culturally that we have the responsibility as believers to be heroes, and being the hero means that we are the bridge that strengthens us and He who is our guide and our heavenly father, who is our creator. It's going to be a challenging time for us, but we have we have the ability to show our own resiliency. I mean, the sheer power of human resiliency

Dr. Don Payne: Is it quite remarkable.

John Allen: It sure is. And we have that, that given to us to survive, living, to overcome. That's what I learned from the lost boys of this one lost boy of Sudan migrated all the other Africa. The Tutsi woman who I missed earlier in her family to the Hutu family as well. And I can go on with other various folks is that tower of human resiliency and the will to survive to keep living, to overcome, and to know that our identity ultimately is in our creative. And as a believer is in Christ Jesus.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Well said. And to see that, that power of resilience as itself, a divine gift that God has given that that always points us to the gospel. And it reminds me of something of well-known theologian said, I won't be able to give the exact quote because it's a little too graphic for air for the air, but I'll sanitize it a bit, that at the end of the day, Jesus Christ is Lord and everything else pales in significance. And that's where we have to anchor everything. John, this man, this has been great. I would love to just so many things I'd love to probe into you further with like your, just your view of vocation. I've always appreciated. We won't go there right now, but I've just always appreciated your integrated view of vocation.

As I've heard you talk about the multiple responsibilities the Lord has given you, you know, with the department of defense and with these congregations, you at some level are still overseeing in South Africa and in Congo. And you talk about all of that as ministry. And that's that integrated view of vocation is something we, we press really hard here at Denver Seminary. So I really appreciate that. And we'd love to chat with you further about that at some point, but maybe just for a moment to close out, we can just come up for air a bit. And let me ask you something silly, in your years there. What was your biggest cultural fauxpas?

John Allen: Wow.

Dr. Don Payne: Or if you can talk about it on the air, what was your biggest cultural fauxpas?



John Allen: I've made so many, so many.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Where do I start?

John Allen: Yeah. Where, where do I start? You say in the greetings I made you know, in Africa, their soul so gracious and, and I'm giving you a pass in speaking the language. So I got to say that, you know, traveling throughout the continent and especially being a part of the congregation where you have folks speaking different dialects and languages to be able to at least show them that you're trying. And you know, Americans tend to be very distant in that space, but if you want to really integrate and be a part of the congregants to get to know them in a very intimate way, we at least have to do some small talk and you got to slow down, and get at least a chance to learn the language. And greetings would probably be my weakness.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. Okay. So like with any cross lingual experience, I'm going to guess that you probably said some things that were rather untoward or unseemly while you were trying to say something else, is that fair to say? Yeah. Oh my. Who hasn't done that with a second language that they really don't know very well.

John Allen: you always get to see smiles on faces after you say.

Dr. Don Payne: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. That's great. Thanks for sharing that with us. Hey, we've been interacting with John Allen. Again, this is part two, and we're so grateful. Thanks, John. This has been just really enriching and challenging and provoking, and it's going to deepen us all. We're, we're grateful for your ministry there and for your time with us. Yeah. This has been Engage360 from Denver Seminary as always. My name is Don Payne, and we are really looking forward to having you back with us next time. We thank you and look forward to our next time with you. Take care.