

## Engage360 | Episode 57 | Serving in South Africa: Apartheid and Moving Toward Forgiveness

**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:** Hey friends, welcome again to Engage360 from Denver Seminary. We're glad you've chosen to spend some time with us. My name is Don Payne. I'm your host. And before we get into our conversation, our interview for this week, let me remind you that we have full length transcripts available for all of our episodes, they're on the seminary website. If you want to consult any of those simply go to [denverseminary.edu](http://denverseminary.edu). You'll see the Engage360 Podcast logo fairly prominent there. You can see all of our episodes and there'll be a little download icon there, if you'd like to download the transcript. Now you may have heard it said that those who pay no attention to history are doomed to repeat it. And I wonder whether it might also be the case that those who pay no attention to the rest of the world are doomed to be just like it. That's my own theory, but that will lead us into today's conversation because during times of distress and upheaval, whether that's on an individual level or on a national level, we all face the temptation to be so consumed with the troubles that are right in our faces.

And then to isolate ourselves from resources in other places that might have something to teach us about what we're navigating. And now if you supplement that with the tendency to have a highly independent mindset and a national self-image of kind of being the guide for the rest of the world, it can really become difficult to learn what we most need to learn. And that's one of the reasons I love to interact with people who have lots of international experience, and I don't simply mean people who've traveled a lot internationally or people who have done a lot of short term work. I mean, there's always something to learn from everybody, but I have in mind, particularly those who have spent extended periods of time living and working in other cultures, they, they learn things that the rest of us need to learn. So I'm really excited to welcome to Engage 360 this week. One of our students in our doctor of ministry program, John Allen, and I'll introduce John to you a little bit more in just a moment. He can supplement that. Welcome, John.

**John Allen:** Thank you, Dr. Payne for having me here.

**Dr. Don Payne:** Yeah. John is coming to us from Maryland from the Washington DC area, lives in Maryland. And so we're grateful. He's been able to carve out some time by phone and visit with us. So John, a little bit of John's backstory that I got to know a couple of years ago or maybe year and a half-ish ago when I met John in a class, a fascinating story. John spent a career with the United States Marine Corps and retired from the Marine Corps. We're grateful for his service there. And has since then been seconded by the Marine Corps to, I guess the

Department of State and overseas security currently for the Peace Corps in, I think the entire continent of Africa. Is that correct John?

John Allen: Global now.

Dr. Don Payne: Oh, global. Global. Okay. So he is the security dude for the Peace Corps internationally. I think when you were living in South Africa you were in charge of security for the Peace Corps in Southern, in the Southern Africa, eight or so African countries, right?

John Allen: That is correct.

Dr. Don Payne: And alongside that or concurrent with his involvement in overseeing security for the Peace Corps, he and his wife planted a church and pastored that church in South Africa for some years. So, he's got this rich and multidimensional international experience that we really want to draw on for some of the things that we're facing today. John the fill in the blanks there, if you'd like to, if there's any, anything more to help us understand what your career entailed and continues to entail.

John Allen: Okay, well again, Dr. Payne, thank you for having me. I will start by just saying I've lived in Southern Africa for about 18 years where I, along with my wife founded what came to be known as the International Community Christian Church of South Africa. However, that wasn't a, as you've mentioned, my initial reason for my relocation, I actually went there on a military assignment. When I was on active duty in the Marine Corps, I was a conduit to the State Department at the US Embassy in Pretoria to help oversee the Marine Security Guard Program. And while there, we started a couples Bible study that met in our home and others that over time involved actually involved into a church fellowship. I had been involved in ministry in the US from a young age. However, I've always been by vocational. And after just a few years, I retired from the Marine Corps, but I was able to pursue other job opportunities that kept me on the continent. I was extremely fortunate to transition from the Marine to work with a fine, fantastic organization that trains and deploys American volunteers to serve and help build capacity in developing and under resource countries around the world. I actually view both as ministry, both my work with the Peace Corps and my church expose me to the cross cultural dynamics that have broadened my perspective to help form my worldview and my approach to practical theology.

Dr. Don Payne: When exactly did you first begin your service in the African continent?

John Allen: I first started in 1999.

Dr. Don Payne: And then moved back here to the US what two or three years ago?

John Allen: I sure did. In 2017.

Dr. Don Payne: 2017. Okay. Okay. So you, you were serving in South Africa located in South Africa, not that many years after the collapse of apartheid, correct?

John Allen: That's correct.

Dr. Don Payne: I'm curious, what was it like Pastoring in South Africa in those years in the immediate aftermath of apartheid?

John Allen: Okay. It was it was an interesting time to be in South Africa, post apartheid. And you can only imagine some of the issues, that one would have to deal with involving race, and things of that sort.

Dr. Don Payne: What did you learn from that experience? What was there in that experience for you and in those years that might shed some kind of light on what the kinds of things we're struggling with in the US today?

John Allen: I would say that one of the things that I probably observed probably more so than anything is that Africans have the ability to, in a sense, have the hard conversations. And oftentimes in our culture in America, we're somewhat hesitant about having those particular conversations. They don't avoid kind of taking those issues head on. Following my time, I would say following apartheid in South Africa, the South Africa government did something that was so amazing under the leadership is Bishop Desmond Tutu to lead what they call a truth and reconciliation committee.

Dr. Don Payne: Right. What was the rollout of that? I mean, you were living in the, again, the aftermath of that how did you see that take shape or impact cultural relations overall?

John Allen: I would say that overall, you could sense that the country was going through some transition dealing with forgiveness, and people in a sense having the where with all to move on. It was a very interesting time to be in South Africa. You could see many individuals that, especially at the grassroots level, still just sort of trying to put their mind in there, around the idea and the concept of forgiveness and moving on.

Dr. Don Payne: You know, the Desmond Tutus truth and reconciliation commission has received quite a bit of press around the world. And it raises the question of what, you know, what does that look like here? What does that look like for us? And I'm sure well, I'm going to guess anyway, that that was not like a light switch, you know, somebody flipped and then all of a sudden it just happened. No doubt, that was just a real difficult process, but I'm really curious, what kind of traction points or hand holes or progress indicators they saw in really moving forward with reconciliation?

John Allen: One of the things that stands out for me would have to be I would start with leadership, President Nelson Mandela, and you've probably read his book, the

Long Walk to Freedom. He described how before taking on and running as the President of this newly formed democracy, that it would be in the country's best interest to somehow address this open wound. And it was in a sense, an acknowledgement that there's been years, decades of inequality, inequity, it's been decades of disparity. And I mean, he really pushed that to the forefront and said, I'm going to lead it in a way where I'm willing to forgive. I'm going to lead this process in a way where I'm going to pull both sides together as the best I possibly can and informing that truth and reconciliation committee or group, it allowed people to come forward with their stories to share their hurt and their years of pain. And it was an opportunity for the entire nation to sort of empathize, but what was created the damage that it had done and to, in a sense have a willingness to say, you know, we can come together and we can get beyond that. And so I would say similarly life and American can be very different for blacks and whites. We need to do more and have more of the willingness to empathize and see life from another's perspective.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Well, I really appreciate that. Now you left. Were you in Pretoria?

John Allen: I sure was. I was in Pretoria.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. And you left there in 2017, lived in Pretoria until 2017?

John Allen: That is correct.

Dr. Don Payne: How would you compare the situation when you left to what it was when you went there?

John Allen: You know, I saw great strides. I can remember the freedom and the Liberty and the sort of the vibrancy of the culture, the liveliness of my parishioners. I could see them progressing. I could see the doors of education opportunities opening up for people who were deprived of those opportunities. I could see jobs being created, and people who were disenfranchised having an opportunity to work at places that it hadn't worked, been able to work before. So I just saw a tremendous transition. Of course there's some, you know, resistance that you observe as well, but for the most part, it was overall improved.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. That's really encouraging and very hopeful, especially these days when I think lots of people are sensing, maybe paralyzed by a sense of hopelessness, just don't know where to go with all this and don't see any options. So that's a great case study. Now, the congregation that you and your wife launched and Pastored, I know international was in the title of it, does that suggest that it was largely a congregation of ex-pats from other countries or more in indigenous from South Africans?

John Allen: Yes. I would say that it started out as an American church of ex-pats, but given our location not far from other embassies, and housing townships, it soon grew

to be a truly international with over 20 ethnic groups and nations being represented.

Dr. Don Payne: Was there any kind of interface between the congregation that the really international complexion of that congregation and what was going on in the country as a whole?

John Allen: Yes, I think so. I mean, South Africa is the economic hub of that whole continent. It's marketed itself to be that. And I could see firsthand of immigrants and refugees coming from all over the continent for better opportunities in South Africa. So it's a sort of a melting pot it's even known as the rainbow nation and they pride themselves of having so many ethnic groups. I think there's a little over at least 11 official tribes in the country. And that comes from both positive and negative responses to immigration as well.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Let's kind of push this out a bit more broadly to the African continent in your work with the Peace Corps across other African countries. Well, and you used the word tribal and briefly my wife and I were in Kenya about seven or eight years ago. I was teaching a doctoral course there in Nairobi. And in this course were Pastors and denominational executives from a variety of denominations and from a, probably about eight different African countries, more in the Northern part of the continent. And it was really interesting to me. It's fascinating to hear these various African Pastors and denominational leaders reflect on the ministry struggles in their countries, which culturally were very different. But at the same time shared in many of them shared a sort of tribal underlayer to their cultures. And one of the things they had in common, one of the challenges they all shared was that as the gospel came into the lives of people in their countries, it was embraced, but it had not yet sort of penetrated into the depths of their value system, which was shaped more by their tribal loyalties. And they were facing a really, what they call a discipleship challenge, trying to get the gospel into the deepest value system of people in their churches, so that when various things political came up that were tribally related, they didn't just start killing each other. And that was very bracing and very surprising for me as an American. But that makes me wonder and want to ask you, what did you observe across the African continent that has informed your understanding of justice issues of discipleship of maybe that might parallel any of our current struggles here in the US? And that that's a multipart question, but I'd love to hear your thoughts on any of that.

John Allen: Well, you know, you raised challenges that you have heard from, or should say tribal differences that have been shared by other pastors working in serving throughout the continent. And I can say I experienced the same I can recall in our particular denomination the number of tribes are that are represented, and that was new for me. I didn't know that you know, that the Hutus and the Tutsis from Rwanda who had migrated to South Africa following the genocide in Rwanda were part of my congregation, and understanding a little bit more about the history of the genocide that took place there. I can remember other situations involving tribes within South Africa and the differences between

conflicts that had taken place in Southern Africa, the [inaudible] and South Africa and other places in the Congo. So, it was it was an eye-opener for me. It was a reminder as well that that humans are humans. And they have the, in a sense, the same issues. You know, we were always trying to find the right balance between that cultural and spiritual teachings and beliefs to maintain awareness and discernment regarding, you know, how you should treat each other and how you should love each other for the higher, good of accomplishing what you want to accomplish. As God's creatures, you want to be a proponent of good governance, and you want to be involved in a sense where you are attacking or addressing economic disparities. You are always aware of the housing any qualities that might exist in those urban hubs. And so ministry in and of itself in operating in that area and realizing the differences and the sort of mobility of people who have come to that space. It takes a lot of prayer, but we saw great success with this in our church because our members had close relationships with one another. And that was sort of one of those things that we kept driving home is that we are sisters and brothers in the Lord. And if we've got close relationships, it will help you go above and beyond some of those internal conflicts or issues of the past.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, yeah, that's a good reminder that in any culture, the church is called in some respects to be a pace setter for what makes unity and justice and peaceful cultures possible, because in any culture we can always say, Oh, we've got to come together. We've got to work together. We've got to change things, but people often get stuck right there when it comes to, well, how do we do that? And of all people, wouldn't we think that the church should be able to set the pace for that and embody some of that because of the power of the Gospel, but that's, you know, that's often a struggle for the church, isn't it, in any culture?

John Allen: It sure is. I mean, and sometimes it starts from not being so insular you know, that you are willing to know the real story of those who have struggled, those who are going through pain, it takes leaving your comfort zone, you know, singing in a different language, being open to, to another person's prayer. And you don't understand the words in their language. I mean, it can take on a wide variety of kind of stepping across the aisle.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Yeah. So, John, from all of your experience as Pastor working in, at the civic level with the Peace Corps and security there, all these different countries, what are you taking away from all of that, that you think most Americans need to hear right now, positively or negatively? What learning should we extract from what goes on around the world?

John Allen: I would say my sort of takeaway is that it gave me a sort of a broader world view that is inclusive of all people, that values them rather than simply tolerate you know, differences. It gave me an opportunity to show some, I should say that I have an appreciation for how folks will express their faith and how they live out their culture, how they embrace gender norms and family roles and responsibilities. You know, there's a in a sense of a scripture passage that comes to mind. And First Corinthians, when Paul is talking about the different kinds of

gifts in First Corinthians Chapter 12, he says there are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit, there are different kinds of service, but the same Lord, there are different kinds of workings, but the same God who works all of them in all men. And now to each one, the manifestation of the spirit is given to the common good. And so I think that's is a kind of a reminder that God gives us his spirit for the common good.

Dr. Don Payne:

Yeah. Well, I'm smiling while you read that text, John, because that is such a familiar text to so many Christians. And at the same time, it has layers of implications or maybe concentric circles of implications that are quite staggering, when you roll it out to some of the experiences that you've had and the cultural differences that you've experienced. I love that phrase you used that we, you learn to value those differences, not merely tolerate them, that alone may be the prophetic word of the day, brother, learning to value those differences in people not merely tolerate them. Man, if we get that down, we're going to get some real hand holes. How overall did your years of service in Africa, in all of your roles affect or deepen your understanding of the Gospel and what the Gospel means, what it means for the Gospel to be the, like the animating core of your ministry?

John Allen:

Wow. you know, I would say after having so many years to be significantly sort of integrated into a cross cultural experience for so many years, I can say that my understanding of the Gospel is sort of securely underpinned by a greater an appreciation of Thanksgiving, gratitude for things often that are taken for granted. It's given me sort of an appreciation of not only gratefulness, and Thanksgiving, but also joy. And when situations are less than ideal, cause I saw quite a bit of that and it gives a, I think it's sort of underpinned my understanding of hope and expectation and you know, of a faithful God to deliver every single time on his promises. And I would say the importance of redemption. I mean, that's sort of crystallize my understanding of the Gospel, the importance of redemption and restoration for all, for all, things breathing alter, you know, wherever believers assembled themselves.

Dr. Don Payne:

Wow, John we are so grateful for your service and it's great to know that your work there, even though you're located in the US now your work continues overseeing security globally for the Peace Corps. That is a far reaching impact, my friend. And we're so privileged to know you and to be some little part of your journey and tell us, tell listeners how they can pray for you in your ongoing service?

John Allen:

Well, I would say that I need your prayers. I need prayer for just endurance, you know, being able to endure and maintain a level of focus as we oversee the continuous work of the church in South Africa. And even a church that we oversee the work and the democratic Republic of Congo, if you could just ask God to continue to give me guidance and wisdom and how to assist those congregations to be all that God has called them to be. I would say you know, the praying that I would be a faithful servant in what God has called me to do also in the public sector is an enormous task with great challenges. But a

fantastic organization, that's doing good all around the world and helping those who are underprivileged, helping those who are under sourced. And I would say last but not least, I have just a couple of more years left with this agency. And before I hope to retire, retire again. I ask if you would pray you know, for me as a Bivocational Pastor and leader in the church. Yeah.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I'm going to ask all of our listeners when they hear that to pray for you in just those ways. John, thanks for your, your service there in so many different ways. And we're, as I said, we're really excited to know you and have a little role in your life in our doctor of ministry program, and look forward to seeing you again, next time you're here in Denver. This has been Engage 360, we've been talking to John Allen and hope that you have learned something today. That's going to be not only provocative for your thinking, but maybe hopeful for your action in working toward reconciliation, working as an agent and instrument of the Gospel, in your circle of influence and in whatever capacity to be a steward of that for the national good for the global good. As we all want to see real healing take place around the globe and here in our own country, in the US and in our own neighborhoods. John, thanks. Thanks for spending time with us.

John Allen: And thank you Dr. Payne for having me.

Dr. Don Payne: It has been a privilege. Thank you all for listening for taking some time to join in this conversation. We are grateful for you, grateful for whatever your role is with us at Denver Seminary, whether you're an alumnus, alumni, whether you are a donor, board member, current student, whoever you are. Thanks. We're grateful for your participation with us. If you have any feedback for us, feel free please, to email us podcast at [denverseminary.edu](mailto:denverseminary.edu) is our email address, and we will look forward to interacting with you again next week. Take care.