

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: Welcome again, to Engage 360 from Denver Seminary. We're glad to have you back with us. My name is Don Payne, your host. And if the events of this last year haven't already made this clear, let me state the obvious every proposed resolution or referendum to a societal problem comes with costs and consequences that seem to perpetuate problems. And all the well-intended slogans we hear recycled every year, just leaves our world with a different version of the same place. The bottom line is we inhabit a world whose fallenness and brokenness is complex beyond calculation. So when we talk about how powerful and redemptive the gospel is, we can all too easily do that by letting that language stay in the safe domesticated boundaries of the printed page or on a website. Now the redemptive power of the Gospel is absolutely central to our mission here at Denver Seminary.

And that's the reason we need to constantly probe what that means in this, this rather dizzy and craziness of our world. And then we have to find courageous and innovative ways of engaging the world with that redemptive power of the Gospel. So one of the most exciting developments here at Denver seminary in the last few years is the recent launch of what we're calling the gospel initiative. And we're really grateful to welcome you to our faculty, Dr. Mark Harden, as the new director of the Gospel Initiative. Mark. Welcome.

Dr. Mark Harden: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Dr. Don Payne: We are so glad to have you here. And so today our President, Dr. Mark Young will take the lead really in this conversation by introducing you to Dr. Harden and the Gospel Initiative as a whole. So, Mark, welcome back.

Dr. Mark Young: Thanks, Don.

Dr. Don Payne: And take it away. Let's learn about the Gospel Initiative and Dr. Harden.

Dr. Mark Young: All right. Thank you Don. Very much. The idea of the Gospel Initiative began to form in my thinking in 2015. I was observing what was happening in the broader landscape of our culture, our nation, and particularly how evangelicals were known and participating in broader conversation, particularly around issues of ethics and issues of how we create a society that is what we want it to be. And to be honest, I was distressed and have been now for a number of years to be frank, that we as evangelicals engage in the public around issues of real concern, to real people, tough issues, but we don't do it in a way that causes the Gospel, we believe to be attractive to them. In fact, you could argue that the way we have engaged the public square has created such a dim and so much fog that the broader society doesn't know us for the Gospel. They don't know that

what we believe is actually something that is credible and compelling and a source of life, real life, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So I started asking myself the question in the midst of this travail, is there a way that Denver Seminary could help the people of God, primarily through local churches create a more compelling and credible presence of the gospel in the broader society? While we talk about these controversial yet terribly important issues that seem to divide us as a nation. And I'll be quick to admit that the whole posture of evangelicalism as white evangelicalism, as engaged in fighting a culture war or culture Wars has been deeply problematic to me, theologically, and certainly in terms of mission, for a number of years. So all of that came together for me in 2015, and then certainly was magnified as evangelicals began to support a candidate, whose way of life, whose values, whose way of communicating, all of which were contrary to the basic values and truths that evangelicals have held dear. So asking those questions in the middle of that type of serious concern, I sensed that we, as a seminary could begin to do something to help churches create this credible and compelling Gospel presence.

Well, turning a dream or an idea into a program is a lot of work. And in almost every regard creates the need for someone to come along, who can take the initial idea and begin to put flesh and bone on it and create real contact and programming in ways that are meaningful to churches. So as we began to think about who might be able to do that for Denver Seminary I reached out to Dr. Mark Harden, a friend who has served in theological education for a number of years and was serving at Pillar College in Newark, New York at the time. And actually I contacted Mark not thinking there was any chance he'd want to come our way and asked him if he knew someone and lo and behold, the Lord touched his thinking and heart. And we began a conversation that ended up in Mark joining our faculty and staff in April, 2020. We just happened to pick a pandemic to bring him on board as his first year.

Dr. Don Payne:

You are a master of timing.

Dr. Mark Young:

Exactly. But I thought it'd be important Mark in this initial conversation, if you just introduce yourself to our community, to our listeners, a bit of your background and how God moved you to come and take over the leadership of the Gospel Initiative?

Dr. Mark Harden:

Sure. The work with churches began with me many years ago, long before I even went to seminary as a young minister. And I spent quite a bit of time working with organizations to build capacity of churches and to train church volunteers, to do community outreach. And in those circles created several nonprofit organizations and helped organize churches to have an impact. And these churches in particular were interested and addressing the issues in their community, and using their facilities, not just on Sunday and midweek, but throughout the week as an important asset of the community to touch the lives of many people. And I've found that work fascinating and invigorating to say the least, and it sort of stuck with me. And through the years I've worked with over

250 churches and it catapulted me into teaching. I was drawn into theological education after I had completed seminary and my doctoral degree because the leaders said that they wanted to bring something fresh into seminary that was more relevant.

And they wanted somebody to teach on city ministries and the urban church. And that started my career as a theological educator for the last 20 years. So that it's a passion of mine that sits real deep. And when I heard about the Gospel Initiative, it resonated with me and I was sort of that boy, go for it. That's bold, ambitious, and that's what we need. And then a few months later, I find myself seriously considering coming on board. And one of the, I won't go into all of the details, but one of the things that made me decide was the fact of my story. I had seen what the church can do. I've seen how churches can flourish with compassion and how they spread the Gospel and help people, everyday people experience the power of the gospel in their lives. And that was enough. So I felt that this point in my career that I could partner up with the president and join the Denver Seminary community, work with the faculty and take this on. And so I'm prepared and passionate about what we can potentially do.

Dr. Mark Young: Well, I am too. Thank you. I'm so struck by the fact that you've been involved in both academia and the local church, and that's really what we want the Gospel Initiative to be wanted to bring that academic credibility of doing research and grounding what we're thinking in good thinking and in good research, but yet at the same time, recognize that the goal and the purpose of the whole thing is to help churches make a difference. So it's not just to collect research, it's to do research so that we can help people help the church do what God's called it to do. And I think your background is uniquely suited there as well.

Dr. Mark Harden: Amen, indeed. The Gospel Initiative research wise it's really called action research because we viewed this as an important opportunity for our students, our faculty, other educators, and church leaders and ministry practitioners to learn. So we view this as a venture and learning and working collaboratively to learn as much as we can about how we can be more innovative out there in the field as we engage and interface with our communities. So the action research allows us to collect data while we're working with churches at the same time, we're all learning. So we're using the research as we go. And that's, what's the beauty of it.

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. So how do you take an idea and turn it into something that actually helps folks? That's the question you've been working on and I'd love to have you, if you could just explain to our listeners in broad strokes, what are the main programming parts that the Gospel Initiative will be rolling out in 2021?

Dr. Mark Harden: Well, I'll be glad to do that. The Gospel Initiative has four areas that we're directed to give attention to. One is we've mentioned, was research and the other one is relationships. And we can do that and research together so we can walk and chew bubble gum. And then another thing was to generate opportunities for learning, by having a dialogue and discussing the tough issues

and generating resources that could be shared with ministry practitioners. And so that's, there is the relationship, the research, the learning, and the learning resources that we have there. And what we've done is we've taken those themes, and have worked over the months to design a program that would allow us to do it in an integrative way. And so as an example, what we do is we do issue forums and webinars that allows us to bring issue experts together.

And those who are passionate about responding to needs related to those issues. And we put a human face on the need, but we talk about the human needs that are apparent in those issues. And so we bring it down to a practitioner level, to a practical level. And we also give individual participants who are in these dialogue discussions with us, and that are learning a lot and increasing their awareness. We offer immediately, and we have a structure to do this where individuals could not only learn more, but mobilize their church. So we created a program where it would allow individuals to go into in depth preparation to do something about it. And then we have actually three phases of that. So let me say this again, they go to an issue of a forum or webinar, and then they meet with us to do something about it by taking one of three or all three phases of an educational training piece.

And that involves a pastor possibly coming with a cohort of his membership and them engaging. And we call them the Gospel Challenge Workshops, because the church faces two problems. Number one, how do we, as people of the Gospel, be better at what we do in the 21st century, how can we reimagine ourselves for church mission and evangelism? That's one problem. And then the other dilemma is, okay, now that we're clear about our objectives and church mission, how do we engage others in a compassionate way so that we can become relevant in the world, and improve our ability to influence change in these communities? And so the first workshop is revitalizing the church. The second one is social engagement. And the third one, the third phase is church mobilization. And they all build upon one another.

Dr. Mark Young: Let me think out loud with you. So if I'm pastoring a local church or I'm leading a local ministry, my first point of contact with the Gospel Initiative would likely be through the issues forums, is that correct?

Dr. Mark Harden: Yes. Unless word of mouth inspires you to move forward, but either way, the issue is the starting point.

Dr. Mark Young: Let's talk about those issues. What are some of the issues on the docket for us to have webinars or forums in 2021?

Dr. Mark Harden: Well, that's great. The issue, as well as action, living out our faith through compassionate action are two things that are so interdependent. You can't pull them apart. So what we do is we, the reason why I mentioned that is because even though a church is interested in an issue, when issues ceases to be popular, that doesn't mean the church stops the action. Churches pick an issue to start with. So many churches, like now we had the killing of George Floyd and

that's around the issue of many issues, but the overarching issue is racial profiling racism that's even systemic racism. That's a huge issue, and it's very complex. But that will be an example of an issue that we educate churches around. And what they do is they understand that those issues are not only complex, but they must be understood at multiple levels. And then through going, reviewing the multiple levels and understanding them better, churches are able to see the complexity of the issues and points in which they are best suited to address the issue. And so there's multiple points of entry into dealing with the issue, but there's also levels of complexity or engagement for churches.

And we help them to see where they fit in and where they can go. While we're in a process of educating about racism will be the larger issue, but the more micro level issue they may be dealing with, maybe a health disparities, for instance, COVID-19 has sort of ripped off the scab and showed us that the systemic racism has influenced us in ways that isn't always talked about. For instance, the health disparities minorities who are our targets of systemic racism often are the first ones who often don't have access to the best healthcare services. So any healthcare at all, and the consequence of that shows itself up in a timeline crisis we're in now. So that's one issue. Another issue might be climate change, which is another controversial issue. Now, this is what we mean by tough issues, issues that the church can't turn a blind eye to because they have such strong implications about how individuals are really suffering and in need of, and have both human needs and spiritual needs of which the church must address as the church of Christ. So every issue creates opportunities for us to put a human face on it. It also creates a pathway for a church to engage itself.

Dr. Mark Young: So let's say I'm a pastor in a predominantly white church, and I want to talk about racism. And I wanna talk about racism at a personal level, as well as a social level system level. Yet, I know that in my church, because of the division, the division that's occurred politically in the white community, for sure. And with the white community and the black community as well in the last political cycle. I don't know how to talk about that. I don't, I'm not sure how to address it and how to help our community come face to face with the realities and then engage it in a way that makes the Gospel prevalent. Is that the kind of need that the Gospel Initiative is going to address?

Dr. Mark Harden: Absolutely. And of course some churches are in one place and another church is in another place. And so what the Gospel Initiative does is that we, we, we walk along churches as we discuss issues. And in that process, you manage the anxiety associated with the issue, and racism is one of those hot button issues. And so there are assessment tools that we use and they help us to determine where a church is, and it also illuminates for the church where they are so that they can strategically look long-term and yet make decisions about the short term. So there's no tough issue that a church has to avoid regardless of how much anxiety it experiences, and we're aware of that. And so we work very hard to make every issue friendly if you will, maybe not a good choice of words, but it is with the understanding of how can we help the church to have an empathetic

understanding of the problem with a human face on it, and yet see where they need to grow and be challenged in their own formation as Christians and people of God. And that's, it's juggling those two things. And the Gospel Initiative we have a tool chest and the research behind us to try to prudently balance those needs.

Dr. Mark Young: What are some of the other issues you think we will be addressing in the Gospel Initiative in 2021?

Dr. Mark Harden: Well, 2021, racism is a very important issue. This year has demonstrated that you can't avoid that. It is so big that we have generated dozens of topics related to it. And we've been talking with dozens of churches that want to deal with that topic. One church in one major metropolitan area wants to deal with racism as a public health issue. And they're working with the local government to view it like that, so that they can deal with more salient human needs based on the consequences of racism, which is very powerful witness for the church and very compelling for the church to not only get involved with, but to show credibility and create a compelling reason for people to trust the church. Another city is choosing to deal with racism, but they're dealing with it because they had a tragedy, a police officer killing someone. And there seems to be no justification for the killing and as a community, they know they need to go into some type of healing.

So you have white churches and black churches and Brown churches coming together to figure out how we can be reconciled among ourselves so that we can help the community. And that's very powerful in itself. Climate change is also huge. It's huge on many fronts, and we've had these great fires in the Midwest and the West, particularly from Colorado to Rocky's to California and Arizona, and families are devastated. We have controversy around who to blame for the fires, but then you have real human needs at the same time and like racism, so you have the intersection of all of these issues. You have class, and, you know, a lot of people burned out were people of means people with good social status professionals, people of all walks of life, and yet they find themselves being hit with this tragedy, working through that, and figuring out how can we have an equitable response given that natural disasters hurt the poor and the rich.

And then one more piece here has to do with immigration. This is the area that we've been hearing about for decades, but has reached a boiling point. Even if our lawmakers managed to come up with some solutions, they are not the answer. You can't simply just throw money. Families, children were imprisoned. Families were broken. This is a wonderful role for the church to intervene. And immigration will not stop. The stressors on families related to immigration have far reaching consequences that will last for generations and exacerbate the issue of homelessness and poverty. So those three issues are enough for us. We were eager and so excited. We wanted to take on every issue for 2021, but we heard a word and it was a good word that we needed to manage ourselves much better. So those are three issues that are most immediate for us.

Dr. Mark Young: I really appreciate the fact that you're going to go deeper into three issues rather than talk about 10 issues at just a surface level. I think that's a, that's a great strategy. And as a Pastor, if I were a Pastor again, I would want that more comprehensive approach. I'd want to go deeper into an issue rather than just watch a webinar and then be left on my own to go figure out what to do.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Mark, one of the things I appreciate about what you're saying is that it is so easy for these issues to be of such, almost immeasurable scale that it paralyzes us and, you know, the average citizen, and certainly the average church member, the average Christian can take all of that in and feel utterly anesthetized and overwhelmed and, not that they don't care, but they don't even know where to start because of the scale. And it sounds like you're in the Gospel Initiative going to be putting a lot of effort into breaking things down, into manageable, doable steps that will, you know, kind of in some sense, maybe alleviate from any church or any Christian, the burden of having to solve all of the problems, but give them some handholds, some traction points to know what redemptive steps they can take. And that, I think, is an enormous benefit because it also takes it out of the realm to use your words from earlier in the abstract, where it's not just a recycling of the same rhetoric year after year after year.

Dr. Mark Young: Yeah. It also humanizes what we want to politicize. In other words, we take an issue and immediately once again, or as it gets into particular news, the media gets politicized and all of a sudden people are taken opposite points of view, and those who are directly affected by the phenomenon that's become politicized are forgotten. And so I hear us saying, we want to step into the lives of people who are bearing the real life consequences of these issues that we've identified. We're not interested in taking political sides, we're interested in entering into those lives in a redemptive way so that the Gospel makes sense to them.

Dr. Mark Harden: Yeah. And so our research of the Gospel Initiative is multifaceted. We have to always understand the problem with a human face. We have to always look at it from the perspective of actionable faith, you know what can the church actually do about it? The church can always do something is what I'm finding. I mean, there's rarely an instance if there is an instance that we can't do anything, we're directed by Jesus to let our light shine and that shining light involves doing deeds that make a difference. And so there's always something we can do, but our research is multifaceted and that we really have to understand these needs in a holistic way. How does someone who has a great need for clarity regarding their sexuality, how does that create problems in their life, make things difficult?

How does that create problems in the church and make a difficult understanding that underscores what the gospel initiative is about? It's about assisting churches to create a compelling and incredible Gospel presence and a community. And it's difficult to do that without that additional knowledge. And so we are at an advantage because we have, you know, we have looked at the

problems that churches are facing in general. And when we don't understand an issue or a problem, and we don't see a way to address it, that just eats away at our credibility, our ability to influence, our ability to be relevant and people's lives. And therefore we have very solid footing on how to be the church that a crisis calls us to be.

Dr. Mark Young: You know, it seems to me we're facing two challenges. As we think about the future of the church, on the one hand, there's almost a growing perception of the irrelevance of the church among the broader community, the broader society that honestly, we don't have anything to say about climate change or anything to say about racism and on and on. But then we also have this issue of growing alienation from the church. And by that, I mean, younger men and women, particularly who are hearing the way their church is talking about these issues that matter to them deeply, but not hearing themselves in that conversation and choosing to walk away from the church. And so if as a Seminary, we can somehow as you've described it, if the Gospel Initiative can somehow help churches, not only relate to those outside the faith in ways that are much more compelling, much more credible, but also relate to those in our bodies who are struggling with the way they think they're supposed to think, or if they're being presented with issues in ways that are not credible, how do we help local churches in many regards bring to a more mature faith those who are thinking about walking away because of the way we have engaged these tough issues?

Dr. Mark Harden: And I hear a third category in your statement, and that's those who've already left. You know, those who are people of faith, people would have a deep sense of spirituality. Being able to spiritually relate to God or relate to God in a spiritual way. I guess I should say it that way. And they are just fed up with the church or church people. And so they decided to go at it alone, work out their own soul's salvation outside. And that group, we are interested in as well, and the growing number of these, they call them nuns in the Pew form, research. Those people who believe in God and have a sense of spirituality, but they don't belong to a church, they're into professional life. Many of them are millennials and the newer generations. And, but they want to define their membership to the body of Christ with the large C the church with the large C, as living out their faith. And so we have great intentions of pursuing them with as much fervor as we have those inside and outside the church.

Dr. Don Payne: Mark. When earlier you alluded to something that I think is worth making even more explicit, you talked about in various cities. And so the Gospel Initiative aims not merely to be a local Denver or Colorado based initiative, but you're envisioning involving and mobilizing and equipping churches for these conversations and involve much all over the place. Right?

Dr. Mark Harden: Correct. Correct. We have worked out a way where we can work with one church or we can work with a half a dozen churches at the same time to achieve the same objectives in our Gospel Challenge Workshops, church revitalization, church, social engagement, and church mobilization. Those are three flagship



training for churches. And we figured out how we could do it on a schedule. And what we've also done is, Don has looked at 21 metropolitan areas. Those that are declining and those that are shifting the religious landscape. So in certain communities, you know, that mainline churches are decreasing, but more evangelical churches, more conservative churches are growing, growing greatly.

And so, and in many of these industrial cities and many of these coastal cities and Southern cities, we see the dynamics of the religious landscape. So we've chosen 21 to target. And it's very hard coming up with 21, or limiting it to 21. And we've targeted them intentionally. And we're trying to go again, go deep and build relationships with churches so that we can bring them in. We're not looking for one time, you know, deal with the issue, talk about how to work on the issue and then walk away. We're talking about long-term relationships. So we have to be very intentional and very wise about how we spend our time. It doesn't mean we wouldn't work with any church but we're working with churches across the country. And so the selection was based on us, how we can spread ourselves wisely around. So, Don, to get more to your question. Yes, we're making ourselves accessible to any church in the US.

Dr. Mark Young: Okay, Mark. This all sounds great, but if I'm a Pastor and I'm interested in, in doing what you're talking about, learning and growing and helping my church engage these engaged people around these issues in a way that really makes a difference in their lives for the Gospel. How do I find out about the Gospel Initiative and the programs that are being offered through it at Denver Seminary?

Dr. Mark Harden: Great question. Great question. We are in a process of launching a lot of our new events, our first-time events on the first of the year, which will be posted on our Denver Seminary website. The website is going through some revisions, but we expect it to be up very soon in a few weeks. But right down [gospelinitiative@denverseminary.edu](mailto:gospelinitiative@denverseminary.edu), that way you can instantly just send us an email, let us know that you were listening and you want to learn more information. We can take your information, and respond to your email at the same time. Again, that's [gospelinitiative@DenverSeminary](mailto:gospelinitiative@DenverSeminary) spelled out dot edu.

Dr. Mark Young: Excellent. Thanks Mark. Don, thanks for having us today.

Dr. Don Payne: It is a real privilege to hear more about this. We're excited to see this get off the ground. It's the realization of a longtime dream and some very generous folks. Who've come to the table to help make this happen, and we couldn't be more excited. Dr. Mark Harden. Welcome. Welcome aboard. I mean, you've been here for a few months now, but still kind of formally in publicly for our podcast listeners. Welcome aboard. So glad to have you here. Friends, this is Engage 360 and as Dr. Harden mentioned go to our website, which is [DenverSeminary.edu](http://DenverSeminary.edu). You'll find the Gospel Initiative there, but email Dr. Harden at [Gospelinitiativeatdenverseminary.edu](mailto:Gospelinitiativeatdenverseminary.edu), as he mentioned. And if you are a Pastor, if you're a grad of ours, if you are a listener of, with some of the kinds of connection and you feel like your church or somebody, you know, might be

interested or might need to know about this wherever you are in the country, be sure and let us know. We want to hear from you. If you have podcasts on what you're hearing on these conversations at all. Please email us our email addresses [podcast@denverseminary.edu](mailto:podcast@denverseminary.edu). We'd love to hear from you, and we want to wish you all of God's blessings for this next year, this next new year, hoping in many ways it is new. Not just because we're going to get it right this time, because we'll never get it right, but because of the redemptive power of the Gospel, that's what makes all things new. So for Dr. Mark Harden, Dr. Mark Young, I'm Don Payne. We hope to talk to you again very, very soon. Take care.