

**Intro** [00:00:04] 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.

**Don Payne** [00:00:17] Hey friends, welcome to *Engage360* at Denver Seminary. My name is Don Payne. I'm really glad to be your host. Glad you've chosen to spend a little time with us. You know, one of the most perplexing decisions that many Christians face is how to choose a church, a congregation. Now that's probably a mixture of blessing and curse in settings like ours, where there are so many choices because that can foster the type of consumer mindset that's not really spiritually healthy, but it can also, on the other hand, sharpen our sense of what's important. The question is how do we make that kind of decision? And that question becomes even more acute, perhaps when it involves those who are looking for a ministry position on a church staff. Because on one hand, if I can put it bluntly, you need employment. And at the same time, you don't want to put yourself in a toxic, unhealthy situation that's going to eat you alive. Now that fear gets really intensified or exacerbated by the number of people who've had really bad experiences on a church staff for one reason or another. And there are all kinds of complexities that need attention in those situations. And even those who maybe don't aspire to working on a church staff will do well to appreciate some of those complexities. Anyway, there's going to be something in this conversation in this episode for just about every Christian. So we're honored to have in this episode is our guest, Dr. Craig Smith, who's the lead pastor of Mission Hills Church in Littleton, Colorado. Greg, welcome.

**Craig Smith** [00:01:49] Thank you so much, Don. Really glad to be here.

**Don Payne** [00:01:51] We are delighted to have you, and thanks for spending some time with us. Craig has pastored a number of churches of various sizes and has given lots of thought and attention to what church health looks like. However, Craig also has a Ph.D. in New Testament from the University of Bristol, England. Craig was also involved here with us here at Denver Seminary for a number of years as an adjunct professor in both New Testament and theology. And was, I have to say, in his presence here, one of our most well-loved adjunct faculty members. So I'm still kind of bitter, adding that they left. No, not really. But we're just deeply, deeply grateful for the many areas of ministry, many forms of ministry. Craig has had both here at the seminary and in this region pastoring. But as I said, Craig's given lots of thought and attention to what church health looks like, and I think for my part, that they've come to model some of that at Mission Hills Church, where he hopes so now as the lead pastor. So we want to have a conversation with Craig about that and particularly Craig, when, where or when or when any of us are thinking about looking to do ministry on the staff of a church? What kind of questions should people be asking now this? This applies perhaps both to the interview process and maybe even more broadly. But what should people be looking for if they are looking to serve in the context of a local church staff, but they don't want to get into situations that are going to be unhealthy? They're going to blindsides them. How do they know? Sure.

**Craig Smith** [00:03:37] Well, I think probably we can talk about some specific questions. It might be useful if you want to, but maybe more useful than specific questions is to back up a little bit and to make sure we understand what it is that we're trying to accomplish in the question asking, right, what answers are we really looking for? Because I think a lot of times what happens is we come up with questions and you know, you can go online and you can find a list of good questions to ask. But if you don't really understand what it is that we're trying to get at with the questions, those aren't necessarily going to be all that useful. My wife and I years ago realized that, you know, we would ask our kids at the end of the day, sitting at the table, you know? Well. What happened today?" "How was your day?" "Tell me about your day." And when we got the same kinds of things that every parent of teenagers has gotten, which is nothing. Fine. And my wife and I had to step back and go, "What is it we're trying to accomplish?" "What are we trying to get to?" And we realize, you know what we're actually trying to get to is not information about their day. We're actually trying to get to engagement. So the questions we were asking weren't doing that. And so we realized, well, that's what we're trying to get to. Then there's a totally different set of questions. And so we started asking questions like, "Tell me about the most challenging thing that happened to you during your day." "What surprised you the most today?" Those kinds of questions that you can't say fine. You can't say nothing. You have to think about. And we realize that that just led to a completely different kind of conversation. But

that change happened because we realized this is what we're trying to get to. So when it comes to finding a fit for a church, especially for somebody who's looking to come on staff, I believe that one of the most important sets of questions that we need to ask are really all aimed at getting to what's the culture of this church? I mean, in theory, you can. You can look at the doctrinal statement of a church online. You don't need to ask any questions to know what they believe. But the reality is there's often a pretty big gulf between, you know, what does the church believe and what does it actually do or what does it believe? And what do its values show up in terms of the way they actually do things right? And so, so really, you're beginning to deal with culture issues here, right? And there's the old saying, and it's absolutely true. I don't know who said it first, but culture, it's a vision for breakfast. And a lot of times I've seen church staff interviewing and they like to ask us, Well, you know, what's your vision for a church? You know, like, everybody likes to talk about vision, but culture eats vision for breakfast. Don't match what your big vision is. If your culture is not healthy, you're never going to get there. And so questions that are designed to understand the culture of the church are going to be much more useful for somebody coming on staff. And so what you're trying to find out, who are these people and how do they go about ministry and what is the team dynamic look like and what is the dynamic between the staff in the congregation look like? What's the what's the relationship of the church with the community around it? All those things are culture. So, you know, there are no question you can ask, but understanding that that's what I'm looking to get at. I don't think I understood that early enough in ministry and when I was interviewing in jobs that I needed understand the culture of the church and that led me, at least in one case. I think I made a really bad decision. I got involved with the church that doctrine and I was like, OK, I'm fine with that. Programmatically what they're doing. Yeah, I was fine with that, but I got into it and realized culturally, we are not on the same page. And it was it was a rough three years of ministry because of that. So really cultural questions designed to understand who is this church? And am I going to fit naturally here or am I going have to become something that I'm not in order to fit in those I think are a big deal?

**Don Payne** [00:06:52] Yeah. And those culture is always more difficult to get at than those formal aspects of stated theology, stated beliefs, culture, values get so embedded and in many cases, so tacit, so implicit that it's really hard to get inside that how did you learn to get inside that and figure out what the culture of a church really is?

**Craig Smith** [00:07:14] So I really come to understand that there's three big questions that begin to help, and you have to develop some good question asking skills which isn't just here's the question got the answer? Check off the box. It's let me lean into something you said there. Let me ask an additional question, but there's three starting areas of questions, and honestly, they're not surprising. They're why, what and who. So the first question I really recommend people when they're looking at a church is to ask people on the interview team and maybe some other people in the church as a whole. Why do you think the church exists now? This is an ecclesiological question, but it's a very, very practical question, and it's deeply rooted in the culture of that church or the culture of that church is deeply rooted in that. You know, why does the church exist? And for me, what I've realized is one of the red flags is if something about the love of God is not part of that answer, that's probably a red flag already, right? Because why does the church exist? What? Why is there any church? Well, I think according to Bibles, because God loves us and wants the world to know that he loves them. Now, it doesn't really matter how you say that. But if there's not some sense that the church exists because of God's love for the world, everything else you're going to build on top of, that's probably going to be a little bit skewed. I think so. So that who question? And then the next question probably is the what which is like, what do you think the job of the church is? What do you think the church does? And if they get the way right, the what is going to make a lot more sense, obviously. But you know, I think again, the Bible, you know, this is the Matthew 28 19 kind of stuff. The Bible pretty much tells us the major jobs of the church, which is to disciple people and send them out into the world to live for the glory of God and to extend the influence of God, right? So admission hills, we say we're here to help people become like Jesus and join him on mission. But it's that's discipleship and it's emotionality. So, so that's kind of the what question, and that's a good place to press in if they give you some answers. Well, you know, we think the church does this. Those look like tell me about how your programs line up with that, and maybe if you've had a chance to see some of the programs to lean in and go, Hey, I noticed you do this thing. Which part of that mission? Because that's really what we're talking

about here. It's the mission of the church. Which part of that mission does it fulfill an end? If you find that there's a lot of programming that's not tied to mission, it's not tied to that understand the purpose of the church. That probably reflects a culture that's not going to be a super healthy one. Or at least it's going to be a confused culture. And then on top of that, I think there's the WHO questions, which is, you know, what do you really believe like? And here's what I think is a great question. OK, so you've got a twelve point doctrinal statement. Which ones of these would you die for? Which ones of these would you say we're going to defend that and if people disagree as well? We'll defend it will argue about why we believe that, but we're not going to die for that one. And do you have any on there that you'd go? That's a discussion. We'll talk about that, but probably not even a defend it and definitely not a die for it. If you find that they're going to die for every single one of their, you know, 12 or 14 or 24 doctrinal points, that's probably a red flag on culture.

**Don Payne** [00:10:21] Mm-Hmm. You know, it's funny. I was just listening, I think yesterday to a podcast interview with a pretty well-known professor who's also an elder at his church was reflecting that in his congregation, particularly over the last couple of years, people were kind of ambivalent about whatever they believed about the millennium. But when it came to the church's stance on whether they should be wearing masks, they would fight over that. Yup. Which was that issue aside, it just telling that that an incident like that would expose something of the values and the culture of church. What is it? You're willing to die for a fight about or make an issue of something, you know, in that case, more circumstantial and arguably political trumped anything theological. Right?

**Craig Smith** [00:11:10] Yeah. And that's a cultural issue, right? Because if you have a church and there's no church that does this perfectly, certainly our church does not do this perfectly and we had some of those same struggles. But if you if you could find the perfect church who was so rooted in their purpose, we exist because God loves us and wants the world to know he loves them and our mission of helping people grow and Christ likeness and join Jesus on a mission to the world and all of their activities were rooted in thinking through those things. You have a congregation that honestly, they wouldn't get derailed over masks, things like that. You know, you have a congregation that would go well, what's best for us being able to reach this community? That'd be the only question we really care about, and we might argue about what we think is best and how and why. But it wouldn't become an issue that's divisive.

**Don Payne** [00:11:54] Yeah, it is a different posture.

**Craig Smith** [00:11:55] Yeah, it's a different posture. But again, what happens is, I think issues like masks or vaccines, those kinds of things, they reveal that the culture of our church is actually rooted in something other than the purpose of the church or the mission of the church.

**Don Payne** [00:12:07] Interesting. Well, just so that our conversation doesn't get too localized only on maybe people who are interviewing or people who are looking for a church is think even more broadly about people who are in a church as members, as participants, as staff members, ministers, whatever. What do we do? That's a kind of simplistically stated. What are the kinds of things we do to kind of nurture health in a church, even if we're in a place that we might think it's a little bit unhealthy? And I'd like you to maybe reflect on some of your own experiences here. How have you tried to nurture a healthy culture in churches?

**Craig Smith** [00:12:49] You know, so as a church leader, as a church congregant?

**Don Payne** [00:12:52] I think about it from a leadership perspective first, at least.

**Craig Smith** [00:12:56] Yeah, that that would be a lot easier. I haven't been just a congregant in a really long time. I've been a vocational ministry coming up on 30 years.

**Don Payne** [00:13:02] You forgot what it's like to simply go to church, right?

**Craig Smith** [00:13:05] And I've forgotten what it's like to look for and find a church. So as far as nurturing church health. So I don't think it's really all that complicated. First off, you always start with why write a clear and compelling why will disarm your critics? It will harm your fans, and it will tend to engage the bystanders in any time you try to do anything different? That's the three groups you got. You got the people like, I hate this change. You get the people. I love this change. I can't believe you waited this long to do this change. And then you got the 80 percent of the people were like, Yeah, yeah, everybody's always tried to do new things. We'll just see what happens, right? But a clear and compelling why this is important, why this matters disarms the critics. It arms the fans. It equips them and empowers them to carry the torch, and it begins to engage some of those bystanders. So that's the first thing you start with. Why? And so for church culture, I think it's rooted in that purpose. Why is there a church at all if it doesn't have something to do with the fact that God loves us? We've probably gotten off track before we've even gotten started. So starting with why? Second thing is supporting that, that work that you're doing on the Y with systems. So that's everything from the language we use to talk about what we're what we're all about and what we do and why we do it to how do we go about making decisions? Do we do budgets on the basis of those things that we say are actually critical or our budgetary decisions based on other things? And that's all system stuff. So we start with why we support with systems a lot more we could say there. But then the third thing is you celebrate wins that when it's being done right, you tell those stories, you celebrate those wins because people like to be celebrated and you, you become over time what you celebrate in that organization. So that honestly, that I think that's a culture engine right there and it's an ongoing thing. You always start with why every change you start with, why does this matter connected to the core issues of, you know, why there is a church? And what's our mission, those kinds of things, and then you support it with the right systems? And then you celebrate the wins and then you go back and you just keep doing that. And over time, culture moves, culture changes.

**Don Payne** [00:15:03] Have you got a story that illustrates that from your ministry?

**Craig Smith** [00:15:07] Yeah. So at Mission Hills, which is a fantastic church, almost an 80 year legacy church that has really long history of being significant in the South and very caring for the community, expanding the gospel. It's just an incredible privilege to be leading there. But when it when I got there, one of the things that I discovered was that the church had gone through some rapid growth a few years before that, and it had outgrown a lot of its systems and processes. And there was a little bit of floundering like what? What do we do next? Kind of a thing. And so I was really privileged to be able to work with an incredible leadership team, and we started talking through this idea of purpose and mission, and we ended up saying, you know, we think our mission. I said it before our way of saying it as we help people become like Jesus and join him my mission. And then we started going, Well, let's take a look at our programs. Is, is that what's happening? And as you imagine, with the church is 80 years old, there was a whole lot of stuff that was happening that we went, That's nice. That's not a bad thing to do, but it's not really on mission. So, for instance, the can be pretty controversial for some people, but I realized that we were doing a lot. We were hosting a lot of birthday parties and anniversary parties and a really nice building and people been there a long time. So, hey, you know, it's our 50th wedding anniversary. Can we do the party here? But in a church that size and it was several thousand at the time that was occupying a tremendous amount of the staff energy and time and facilities. And as a team, we looked at that kind of thing. We went, you know? That's not really on mission. It's not really helping anybody become more like Jesus or join him on mission unless we really get stretchy about the way defining that. And so we just said we're not going to do that anymore. We canceled all those now. We had people we love that, of course, are disappointed. So we did some things like, Hey, we'll actually give you a little bit of money to go down the road and run an event center there because we really we love that you've been married 50 years. We really want to celebrate that with you. But this campus exists for the sake of helping people become like Jesus and join my mission. So we did that and we drip that phrase, becoming like Jesus joining my mission. Almost every message. And if you engage in social media, you'll see it constantly. And it's really interesting. Now we're been in about five years that that's just the language everybody uses. And not just the words they parrot, but I've seen it consistently be the way they make decisions, and it pushes pretty deep in the organization. But also, and it's so great to see our serve team members are what we call our volunteer teams. That's how they think,

and that's what they do and they sometimes call us. Why are you guys doing that? How is that helping anybody become like Jesus?

**Don Payne** [00:17:38] Yeah, it's great when they repeat that back to you did it when...

**Craig Smith** [00:17:41] they call us out because we're not living out the mission that we've talked to, but it's a fantastic thing. So yeah, I've just been really privileged to see the power of that in a fairly large congregation over time with again starting with why supporting with systems and celebrating wins.

**Don Payne** [00:17:56] Yeah, you and I have both. I'm sure heard lots of people kind of push back against the organizational structural systems dimensions of churches with the argument, Well, the church is not an organization, it's an organism that that old cliché. Do you think there are any differences? If so, what between how we would assess health in any other organizational setting and how we would assess health in a church organizational setting?

**Craig Smith** [00:18:28] Well, sure. I mean, on some level is going to have to be some differences because what constitutes health in a, you know, a corporate setting where we're talking about making money or those are the kinds of things it's going to be a different set of assessors or metrics are going to be different.

**Don Payne** [00:18:39] It's kind of one bottom line. Yeah.

**Craig Smith** [00:18:41] One bottom line. Although even in corporate settings, more and more people are realizing that if we're actually not taking care of our people, if we're not building community, if we're not actually being first and foremost for the customer, then the bottom line is going to be a man. So in some ways, they're actually drawing back towards a lot of the metrics that the church would have used anyway. So, so yeah, I mean, there's going to be some of those differences, but I do really believe that this idea that, you know, there's a dichotomy between the organism in the organization, I just think it's a false dichotomy. I mean, if we go to the Bible, right? The metaphor is it's the body. It's but it's a human body, right? And is that an organism or an organization?

**Don Payne** [00:19:17] Yes. Yeah. It's still a system.

**Craig Smith** [00:19:19] As soon as you move beyond a one celled organism, you've got more than one cell operating together. They have to be organized or they're working against each other. As soon as you move beyond a one celled organism, you've moved into an organization. And so that the metaphor of the body is the metaphor of multiple cells, right? And multiple organs that have to work together. And they can't they can't be working at odds with each other, or that's problematic. And so I do think there's a lot of organizational wisdom that the secular world probably recognized in some ways before the church did. Although more and more I go back to the Book of Proverbs and. I go almost everything that I see out there in the organizational or business organizational language. It's contained in the Book of Proverbs. So, you know, wisdom is wisdom. Truth is truth. So yes, there are some differences, but I do think that dichotomy probably is problematic. I mean, if, if anything, as the church, we should think more highly about the call to steward the resources that we've been given for God's glory and for other people's goods. And so the call to be careful about the way that we're investing rather than just spending resources is higher in the church than it is in the corporate world. And for that to be done well, I do think we have to think wisely about how we organize and how we mobilize towards the mission

**Don Payne** [00:20:39] that, you know, that does speak to this kind of a common. Disaffection, if that's the right word. With some of the organizational dimensions that we find in the church, I know lots of people, both ministry staff members and congregants will often be very uneasy with what they perceive to be utterly secular facets of organizational structure, such as performance expectations, performance reviews that feel so feel so worldly in their mind. Sure. And then, I mean, it's understandable, and I'd love to know how you have helped your folks deal with this when you know when you have staff members who still, you know, they might be underperforming. But as far as anybody in the congregation knows, they're just great

people who come alongside others and they love on them well, and it becomes very disruptive in their thinking when they realize they're held accountable. Because this is, I mean, it's it is their ministry, but it's also their employment. And those two, those two facets seem in many people's minds to clash.

**Craig Smith** [00:21:53] Sure. Because you're coming up from a different. Perspective, right? Every position has a perspective. And so the position of the congregant, the person in the church who is receiving care from a staff person, their perspective is going to be they served to me that they love me. They cared for me. My life is better. My walk with Jesus is better because of them. That's absolutely true. And it's why it's so crucial, I think, for church leadership to recognize that perspective and to be able to affirm that staff person who might be, as you said, underperforming and go, Hey, we're not saying you're useless. We're not saying God hasn't used you in. Let's talk about these good things. But then there's that other side. And so from the organizational side of it, or if we want to use the language from the stewarding of the resources, God's given us plenty. I like that language. Plenty of parables that Jesus taught that are about the importance of being a good steward, right? Because it's not our resources from that perspective. From that position, you have a perspective that says, Well, you know, let's just be realistic. We're paying X amount of money and we're getting this amount of work. So I'll give you a story. I had an unfortunate situation years ago. I had a staff person who was in charge of doing some stuff with student ministries, and they were amazing with about eight to 10 kids. Just amazing with them. The problem was the church was growing and it had gone from eight to 10 kids to 20 kids, and a lot of those other 10 kids just weren't really getting connected. And as we began to talk about how, you know, like how do we connect with them and even what programs would work to be able to expand the ministry to a larger group of people? And there was a kind of a strong pushback that, oh, you're talking about programs, but this is all about people. Right? So you're talking, you want a program and I want to talk about people and I had to go, Well, no, I'm actually very interested in people, the programs or how we scale care to a crowd. Programs are actually how we care for a larger number of people. That's what they should be anyway, if they're being done right and this person just really could not see that good friend. I love this person dearly and really use powerfully even to my own daughter's life, but couldn't see that could make that change. And so ultimately, we had to make a staffing change because there is a responsibility of the church leadership to make sure that you know that everyone's being taken care of and that we're able to scale that to whatever crowd Jesus is bringing us. You know, it's not that we have to get bigger and bigger and bigger. But if we've been given resources and there are people coming who are getting cared for because a staff person in some way isn't able to make that transition, then to keep them in that position is a not good for other people that they're not getting care. And B, honestly, it's not good for that staff person over the long haul because they'll constantly live in that tension and frustration. So it's really always about putting expectations on the table and agreeing these are either reasonable or other unreasonable. And if we can't agree on that, then we may have to part ways. But if they're reasonable and you can't meet them, we might also have to part ways.

**Don Payne** [00:24:56] You know, there are the countless people who have, for any number of reasons, just had had bad experiences working for a church who's ever fault. It was whatever is irrelevant. They've just had bad experiences. It's kind of like, you know, being jaded because now you've worked in the kitchen and you've seen how the sausage is made, you know? Sure. What advice counsel do you have for folks who still feel like God's got a place for them, serving within the context of a church minister or, for that matter, maybe any organized ministry setting church or parish church? They've had bad experiences. They've got wounds. How do they move forward? I mean, there's really broad, but.

**Craig Smith** [00:25:41] Well, no, it's a really important issue, Don, and I think one of the first things we have technologists who hasn't been hurt by the church, right? I mean, the church will be an amazing place if it weren't for all the people. But, but unfortunately,

**Don Payne** [00:25:54] to get rid of all of it would be a great time, right? Except that, yeah, except for you and me, that

**Craig Smith** [00:25:59] the people are the church, right? The church is in a building we come to. It's not a set of programs we participate in. It's actually the people of God engaged in the mission of God in the

world. So yeah, the church would be a great place if it weren't for all the people, but it wouldn't be a church because we got to have those people. So unfortunately, none of us are fully redeemed, right? We're not fully sanctified. Actually, I met a guy the other day that really did think that he was. He could not remember a time that he had knowingly since he's in a different category than me and probably the rest of us. So we're going to hurt each other. And unfortunately, because sometimes the toxicity you mentioned, toxic culture, sometimes that toxicity becomes such a part of the culture that it's just chewing people up and spitting them out. And unfortunately, that's true in a lot of churches. Yeah. And we could talk about the reasons for that. But it's unfortunately an endemic problem in the church. So how do you heal from that and recover it from it? Well, one of them is just recognize that we're behind enemy lines, right? We're on this side of eternity. We're in the enemy's territory, and we would love to think that the church is a holy exemption to that. There's no room for the enemy, but as long as we recognize that even the people in charge still have sin, we still have some affinity for our enemy and that still plays out in the way we treat each other. So we're just going to recognize this is just part of it. Like if you're in a war and you get shot, you're not going to go. I cannot believe this happened. This is so unfair. It's so unexpected. I can't believe. Well, no, you're like as A. as in a war. So I think honestly, one of the keys is remembering, No, we're actually behind enemy lines. We are in a war. We do have an enemy that very much wants to keep us on a short leash and keep us from doing what we're called to do. And so where he can cause hurt, that's going to happen, where he can magnify that hurt in our minds and sometimes where he can turn that hurt into more than it ever was. That ultimately becomes bitterness and anger and resentment towards the people of God and his, his institution, the church. He's going to do that. I've just seen it happen over and over again. So I honestly think one of the first keys is just going right. I'm behind enemy lines

**Don Payne** [00:28:05] as opposed to interject there, as opposed to fostering the illusion that I'm going to be able to find a place where this will never happen. Right?

**Craig Smith** [00:28:13] Because it's not, it's going to happen. There's just no possibility because of where we are because we're behind enemy lines. So I think that's the first key. I think one of the other things that we probably have to do is just recognize that when we've been hurt, we probably need some time to heal. You know, I've seen unfortunately, people go from one very hurtful situation in a church context into another church context. And sometimes that second context was also hurtful. And then, you know, then they go to the third one. But sometimes the second and the third one weren't necessarily as hurtful as they were perceived to be. But the people came in with such wounds because they came in so quickly after the last church hurt. Right? I mean, the wound hadn't healed over. It hadn't even scab over. It was still raw. So every little touch just felt like an electric lance of pain. And then, you know, it hurt people, hurt people. So, you know, then they would respond in certain ways, and that would just it would. It was a spiral of toxicity. So I really do encourage people that if you've been hurt and so many people have it, sometimes it's OK to step back from that for a period. Catch your breath and heal. Yeah, catch your breath and heal before you move back into it. And then when you get your feet back under, you begin to feel like you're getting your feet back under you. You're going to ask yourself this question. You know, which alternative did Jesus give us to the church? Like if? Right? Yeah, I mean, yeah. And this para church ministry and I've been parts of Parish Church Ministry. I love them, and they're such a valuable part of what we do. But as far as God's chosen agent for transformation in the world, what alternative give us so. Yeah, the church has hurt me. I get it. Yeah, the church can be awful. What's the alternative? You know what, who else is the Bible tell us where else that Jesus point us to be in community with other followers or followers who are looking to be on mission with Jesus? There's just not another one. You know, you go all, I'll start my own church. Yeah, but you know, sooner

**Don Payne** [00:30:12] or later, sooner or later, we become the very thing we run from, don't we?

**Craig Smith** [00:30:15] Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And you know, and if you're part of the problem and you're always part of the problem, I have never not been part of the problem. If every church heard I've heard had when I look back on it, I go, Well, yeah, part of that was me, and this is what it was. And so you can go somewhere else. But problem is wherever you go, there you are, right? Yeah. And there are other people are. And so it's still going to be people. So some time to heal, but then some realization you OK. We're

behind enemy lines and there's just not a lot of alternative church. We weren't given one this part of the thinking there.

**Don Payne** [00:30:47] I think it occurred to me a few years ago that when people are hurt in the church or by the church, there's a sort of immediate impulse to withdraw, isolate. And I began to think that relational wounds are only healed relationally, even though, to your point, there is a place for stepping back, catching our breath, getting our feet back under us, being able to process some things, maybe get some counsel, some input on some of those matters. But ultimately, Relational wounds are healed relationally, they're not healed in isolation, I mean, is that fair to say?

**Craig Smith** [00:31:26] Sure. I mean, a broken leg, what's the final stage in healing after the bone itself has started to mend physical therapy? You've got to use the leg. Right? You can't heal a relational wound if you're not engaging in relationship.

**Don Payne** [00:31:39] Yeah, yeah. Otherwise, where does forgiveness and redemption and community? But where does all of that get circulated among us? If we're in isolation now, Craig, do you have any maybe just two or three practical tips you'd want to leave people with when they're thinking about either trying to foster church health, trying to assess church health, trying to, well, foster it, nurture it?

**Craig Smith** [00:32:08] Yeah. Well, again, I'll go back and say understanding the purpose of the church is just absolutely central and mission on top of that. And then, you know, beliefs, behaviors, values, this is who we are. Kinds of things are absolutely key. So asking questions around that is really powerful. And even if you know, if you're interviewing at a church thinking about coming on staff or you can think about going into that church and you don't know that you have exactly the right answers to those questions yourself, just asking people, Well, how do you think about this? Their answers will tell you a lot about the culture of the church. So I do think that's that super practical. Like, I'm a metrics guy. I'm a numbers guy. OK, I really I mean, there's a whole book of numbers in the Bible. I don't think there are necessarily a bad thing now. Can they turn into something cold and calculating? Yeah, but I like to say, you know, thing is like about every number. Every number has a name or a name as a story. Every story has an ending in every ending as a sequel, which is why we're doing what we're doing, right? Because that sequels, either with God forever are not. And that's a big deal. So it might start with a number, but it's always ultimately about people. So I think no questions like. How many people said yes to Jesus at your church this last year, how many baptisms were there? And it's not that you're looking for a big number or a small number, but unfortunately, I mean, you and I both know that there's a lot of churches that go years between seeing anybody say yes to Jesus.

**Don Payne** [00:33:34] Yeah, I guess well, I guess what you're looking for is just is that kind of thing even happening?

**Craig Smith** [00:33:38] Is that kind of thing even happening? Yeah. I mean, again, I don't really care about the number, right? But I care whether or not there is a number or if they say, Well, we don't know. Well, OK. Hang on a second. That'll tell you a lot about their interesting other purpose that if the church exists because God loves the world and if the mission of the church is to help people become like Jesus and join him on mission in the world, and nobody's saying yes to Jesus and haven't for several years, your culture is not actually rooted in your understanding of the purpose of the mission of the church. You might have words for that, but you don't actually have a heart for that. So, yeah, I know that might be controversial, but I actually think numbers can be revealing. I and I know this was going to sound super unspiritual, but talk to me about how, how, how close you've been to making budget the last few years. Because Jesus said, where your treasures there your heart is. And it's not about money, but the reality is like Jesus said, you can't serve two masters and in the generosity of a church, speaks to their discipleship. And you know, if you've got a church that's constantly failing to meet realistic budgets now, if the budget was unrealistic, it was just a pie in the Sky Dream versus. Well, this is what we saw coming last year, and we've seen a little growth. So we're, you know, we're putting our budget just a little bit above it. That's a different thing. But you know, if the congressman's not giving financially that that says something about the culture of the



church asking questions about the number of people who are serving, who are who they're talking about a new person who's started serving in your church recently, you're really excited about. And if the answer is well. You know, it's just Martha, right, she's been doing it for 25 years. Oh, God bless Martha. That's so great. She's a faithful servant. Nobody has come alongside Martha. There's no new people serving in the church that you can think of. OK. That's, you know, followers of Jesus lived generously. It's one of the things we do. It's part of our discipleship, not just financially, but with time and serving others, right? So asking questions around like how many new people have you have serving or told me about people who went on a mission trip, those kinds of things they can tell you a lot about the culture of the church. Again, it's not just numbers, numbers of names and those names are part of a bigger story. That is what we're trying to get at when we're trying to pick a church, either as a staff person or an attendee.

**Don Payne** [00:35:57] You know, it strikes me that there are lots of people who feel God's nudging God's, calling into some form of pastoral ministry in a church context. And, you know, we've been talking about how to. How to identify a church that's got a healthy culture. The reality is, I think that there are lots and lots of churches that are simply really unhealthy, unfortunately.

**Craig Smith** [00:36:26] Yeah.

**Don Payne** [00:36:27] Is it kind of a maybe a dumbly framed? Yes. No question. But is it? Is it worth it for some to say, you know, this is a this is a really unhealthy place, but I'm going to go serve there anyway.

**Craig Smith** [00:36:42] A it's a great question, Don, I think I think this is where we begin to talk about the leading the Holy Spirit. Yeah, and the call of God, not just in our lives towards vocational ministry, but is God calling us into that specific place so some people have the gift for that. You know, this revitalization ministry, my wife, Coletta, does a ministry to pastors' wives supporting pastors, wives. And so we've been privileged to be able to support a number of pastoral families in throughout the United States and really throughout the world through that ministry. And there are some people that I'm just like, they're rock stars in my mind, that they go into small churches that are dying. And honestly, they have a really toxic culture in their ministry has helped turn that around and make it a healthy place. And they're gifted by God to do that and they absolutely need to go into there. When I'm talking to somebody who says, Well, you know, I'm interviewing at this church and I've kind of discerned that the culture is pretty unhealthy, it's pretty toxic, and they want to know, should I take the job? I usually talk to them about how called do you feel to do that particular type of ministry because it's a very unique it's much needed, but it's a very unique gifting and type of ministry. And the reality is, I think a lot of people aren't equipped for it. They're not gifted for it. And when they go into that, it's just going to chew them up and spit them out. So I often advise people that that I'm coaching. I'm not sure that's the best church for you right now.

**Don Payne** [00:38:04] Okay. Yeah. Know what's giving you hope for the church?

**Craig Smith** [00:38:08] You know, I'm convinced that the world that we're living in is really different than the world that we were living in. Honestly, two years ago before the pandemic hit, right, but certainly really different. The world we're living in 10 years ago or 20 years ago or 50. And yet I just see signs of hope. One of my greatest joys is to try to grow fruit on other people's trees. And so I get to coach pastors around the country, and it's just a huge privilege. And I just see a lot of creative ministry. I see a lot of they're rooted in scripture, they're rooted in the fundamental, you know, core, I'll die for these beliefs of the church. This is never going away, but they're being really creative about the ways that they're actually engaging and reaching people, you know, and some of that's digital, but some of that's in-person stuff that's just different than we've ever done it. And I see the spirit of God moving. I see people saying yes to Jesus. I see people taking steps to follow Jesus on mission, and I see that happening all over the place. And I'm super encouraged by that. The churches in no in no way, you know, at risk of dying out.

**Don Payne** [00:39:12] Yeah, that's good to hear. Greg, thanks.

**Craig Smith** [00:39:14] You're welcome. My pleasure.

**Don Payne** [00:39:15] We've been talking to Dr. Craig Smith, who is the lead pastor at Mission Hills Church in Littleton. And just very grateful for his ministry, his partnership with us and all the wisdom that he's been able to share with. Hopefully, you all who are listening, but also the many who he and his wife, Coletta, have been able to come alongside in so many different ways. Our friends, this is engaged 360 and we would love it if you would maybe recommend this or any other episode to a friend. If anything you hear has been helpful to you in as podcast hosts always say, please, if you've found this helpful, please get on your podcast platform and leave us some kind of a rating or review, and we'd love to even hear from you. If you'd like to email us with questions, comments, suggestions you can reach us at podcast at Denver Seminary Dot Edu. We also have a recently rebuilt seminary website, The Denver Seminary Edu, and we'd love for you to spend some time on that and see what resources there are for you. Whether you're thinking about a degree program or not, there's stuff there that will benefit you and your faith in your ministry. So we have another conversation. I hope the Lord blesses you and keeps you. Thanks for spending a little time with us. Take care.