

Engage360 Ep 99 | Ministering Through Hospitality; Rebecca and Deric Sneller

Intro 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 Hey, engage360 friends. I want to let you know about something I think you'll find really beneficial. If you have been a listener for very long, you've probably heard me interview Dr. Angie Ward a couple of times. Angie is a widely respected leader and author who also serves as the assistant director of our Doctor of Ministry program here at Denver Seminary. Well Angie is going to serve periodically as a co-host and guest host of Engage 360, in fact, she is the host for the episode you're about to hear. And I invite you to leave a rating or a review on whatever podcast platform you use and let others know what you enjoy about Angie or the guests and conversations that we bring to you on Engage 360. So, thanks for making us part of your day. And here's Angie.

Angie Ward Hello and welcome. My name is Angie Ward, and I am the guest host today because our usual host, Dr. Don Payne, is out of town. Plus, as assistant director of our Doctor of Ministry program, I have a connection to our guest today, but I'll get to that in a moment. As of 2021 for my research, there were 1.3 million men and women serving in the U.S. military, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and the newest addition to the Space Force. Here in Colorado, we have seven military bases, but somewhere between 160 to 180 thousand of our military serve overseas. In Europe, the largest concentration is in Germany, with over 35,000 service personnel stationed there. But that, I learned, is dwarfed by the more than 56,000 personnel stationed in Japan. These are men and women, many of them young men and women, single, newlyweds, families who are thousands of miles from home, some literally stationed on the other side of the world. During and after World War Two, several organizations formed to help meet the spiritual and emotional needs of these service personnel. One of those was the Overseas Christian Servicemen's Centers, or OCSC, which is now known as Cadence International and is headquartered in Englewood, Colorado, which is right down the road from us here at Denver Seminary. Which brings me to my guests today, who I think when the award for Furthest Distance traveled to appear on the podcast. Deric and Rebecca Sneller live in Okinawa, Japan, where they serve as hospitality house coordinators with Cadence International. Deric is one of our doctor of ministry grads receiving his degree in May 2021. And then apparently Rebecca was undeterred by seeing what he went through. And so she started the program in fall of 2021. She's here this week for DMin intensive seminars, along with Deric and their children. Deric and Rebecca, welcome back to Denver and thank you for being on the podcast.

Rebecca Sneller Thank you. Thanks for having us.

Deric Sneller Good to be here.

Angie Ward Yeah. Let's start by each of you telling me a bit about your journey and what led you to serve with Cadence. Why don't you start, Deric?

Deric Sneller Sure. So even prior to Rebecca and I meeting here at Denver Seminary, which is a fun story in itself, but that's another day, another podcast, I suppose. In the mentoring program, my mentor was an Army Reserve chaplain, Bruce Sidebotham, and he said, Hey, if you're going to be an Army chaplain, you need to know about the different ministries that serve the military. So, he took me around town to each of their headquarters to talk with leadership, and Cadence was one

of them. And I was very struck by their approach to ministry and just how much life sharing there was. And I thought, Oh, that would be awesome to do someday. And I was forecasting after a full active-duty military career. So that was my first introduction to Cadence.

Rebecca Sneller Yeah. And mine started a lot younger. I grew up an Army kid, so my dad was career army. And when I was in elementary school, we were stationed in Stuttgart, Germany. And so, we attended a hospitality house. Not just any hospitality house, but my grandparents were the directors. So that's a really fun story. My grandfather was also career army and then they joined Cadence in their fifties. So, after he retired from the army, they joined Cadence, OCSC at the time, and they were in Germany as house directors. So, for four years, every Friday night I was over at their hospitality house. And so that was my first impression of what is now cadence. It was deeply impactful for me, even as a little girl.

Angie Ward Wow. Yeah. What a convergence of worlds. I don't think I remembered all of that part of your story. And how long have you been with Cadence, both of you, together?

Deric Sneller Nine years.

Angie Ward Okay. Wow. Great. And you talked about the house or hospitality house, and you guys are hospitality house coordinators. Tell me, what does that mean? What does that entail? And I'll have you start, Rebecca.

Rebecca Sneller Okay. So, yeah, the the primary program or the primary thrust of cadence is what is called hospitality houses. And it's basically a place, a home where the directors live and then they invite the service members in. So the main philosophy of ministry is hospitality discipleship. So it can look very different depending on the context, depending on the temperaments and gifting of the couple who's in the home. And that's one thing that we really love about Cadence is that no two houses look exactly the same. For us, it looks like we open up the house for a weekly potluck meal. Usually on a Friday night. We have mostly airmen coming in. We're right across the street from Kadena Air Base, which is the largest Air Force base outside of the United States. But we also have Marines, soldiers, Navy sailors. So they come into the home, we have a meal together, and then we have coffee upstairs, we have a coffee bar. And so we enjoy some coffee. And then we open up the word, we have some Bible study, discussion, and teaching. And then in addition to that, that's kind of the main thrust of of ministry, but it's a lot of relational ministry just meeting together one on ones or in smaller groups throughout the week. There's also a women's Bible study that occurs weekly in addition to some some men's ministry, if you want to speak to that.

Deric Sneller Yeah, I think that just maybe even before I jump into men's ministry to take a step back, not only does ministry vary depending on the the locations, needs, and the directors giftings, but there's just all kinds of flexibility of form. And we've played with forms so much. Like even our Friday nights, of course COVID brought all that up even more, but we were already used to being flexible with form. So men's ministry has been no exception. We did a weekly Bible study, but the challenge with that is guys would come in the second week, they'd say, This was awesome, but I'm going to be gone for the next month. I'm going to miss the rest of it. So we experimented with a different format that I came up with called Men Faith and Fire, where we just have a monthly fire.

Angie Ward I'm assuming outdoors.

Deric Sneller Outdoors. Yes. So we have a little fire pit and men with fire and we talk about faith and it's an open forum on purpose with very limited rules, but enough structure to keep us on point but really meet them and where they're at with what they're learning, what questions they have, that kind of thing. So that's been a fun experiment over the years.

Angie Ward Wow. And then you said your every day, you know, you have some of these events, but then every day life is just like, what are your daily schedules look like?

Deric Sneller It varies a lot. And the challenge with the military is they have very demanding schedules, especially Kadena Airbase. It's an incredibly high operations tempo and I tell service members all the time, I don't care what your job is, this is the highest operation tempo you're probably going to come across. Everybody just works really hard, really long hours, sometimes really wonky hours in shifts. So that can be a challenge at times of how do you share the gospel and your lives with the military, when the military, based on their mission, has a very challenging duty and life.

Angie Ward Yeah. And it's very transient. What, two or three years, I would guess would be standard before you get transferred. We have some friends who've served in various branches and we're following them all around the world as well. And so your hospitality house, is that the only cadence hospitality house in Okinawa? Are there several? How many service personnel are within kind of range of your house?

Rebecca Sneller Yes, that is a good question. No we are not the only house. There is another house that's been there just about as long as the harbor, that's the name of our hospitality house. It's up north. It's called the Hansen Christian Center. And they are attached to Camp Hansen, which is a marine base. They have a completely different demographic because their Marines are there usually on a TDY, which is a short-term mission, for about six months and it's unaccompanied. So even if they're married, their spouses are not with them. So it's a very different population that they're ministering to. Our house, like I mentioned earlier, is right across the street from the largest air force base outside of the United States. We have a lot of families there. It's predominantly young, I would say twenties and thirties. But we also have a lot of very young singles coming right out of high school. So I think it does depend. And like I mentioned earlier, each house, we have houses, cadence has houses all over the world and in the United States. So a lot of it really depends on what military post or military base that they're kind of associated with regarding their particular demographic, who it is they're trying to reach, the particular opportunities and obstacles that might be there. It kind of varies from place to place.

Angie Ward Yeah, I would imagine, you know, the United States versus Germany versus Japan or the U.K., I think, and whether it's whatever branch of the military, and if it's more a special force versus kind of standard. Wow. Well, so what are some, you've talked a little bit about some of the unique needs of service personnel, but like, why is it important to minister to those in the military?

Deric Sneller Well, you know, we could give you the canned, I don't want to say canned response, but Cadence has a really great document out there that basically says seven reasons why. And it's really thorough and really true of, well they're young, you know, like there's a whole lot of firsts, even if it's not the 18, 19-year-olds. There are no old people in the military. You get old, they kick you out. It's just a very interesting culture besides being transient. So they're a young culture. A lot

of firsts. They're uprooted. They're transient. So to come along side young people and play a role, whether that is peer, which we're aging out of that role.

Angie Ward Yeah, you're getting to military retirement age.

Deric Sneller Exactly. Or whether it's the peer, the parent role, or that you move on up the ranks up the ladder. But yeah, so we're just there for a whole lot of firsts. We see a lot of young married couples in their first year or two of marriage and they're like, Oh, what did I sign up for?

Angie Ward Yeah, that's a tough first year.

Deric Sneller Yeah. And the military, it's very interesting as a culture and I'm probably jumping ahead of myself. But the military culture, by and large, marries younger and has kids younger than the general population. So there they are. And they have very legitimate, practical needs that we can come alongside and just join them in life.

Rebecca Sneller Yeah. I mean, as Deric said, they are their own people group. So, I think those listening who have experience in the military or if you know someone who's in the military, it doesn't take too long in the conversation to realize that that's true. They kind of have their own language. They have their own worldview for sure. So they are very much their own people group, their little subculture of America. And so it is an honor and a privilege to get to minister to them. And we certainly see a lot of the benefits to this people group. I mean, Deric mentioned they're young. One of the results of that is by the time they retire, they're our age like in their forties. So they have a kind of a second career ahead of them. I would also add they have a worldview that is well, they've seen a lot of parts of the world because they're transient, they've moved around, they're used to being adaptable and resilient in a lot of ways. They also know what it's like to feel isolated and lonely. They know what it's like to be, a lot of them, in a different culture, stationed overseas, away from family. And yeah, they also have this mission mindset, which I think is pretty unique, that other Americans might have, but the military really pushes. I mean, it's a mission ready culture. So they already have the value of putting the mission first and making sacrifices for the mission. So regardless of where they're at in their faith, walk with the Lord, that is kind of an undergirding value of the military culture, is we're going to make sacrifices for the mission, for something greater than ourselves. That's deeply rooted in the military subculture there.

Deric Sneller There's circumstances that are unique to this people group. But then there's positive character traits, like Rebecca's reference, saying there's adaptability. There is mission first. There's the fact that, yeah, they have a wide open future, whether they do a short term, I mean, the population, the percentage of Americans that do just a few years in the military, it doesn't even have to be a full career. But even if they do a full career, they still have a very wide open career ahead of them. So it's pretty amazing, to borrow missiological language, they're a unique people group with lots to offer and lots of unique needs.

Rebecca Sneller Yeah. And piggybacking off of that, I would say as far as the original question, why is it important to minister? We spoke to some of maybe the characteristics of them as a people group, but I would say also their needs. So the fact that some of the things we mentioned, they're isolated, they're overseas, they're young. I'm sure those of you listening can fill in the gaps with what some of those needs might be. And maybe you've heard some statistics, regardless of how familiar you are with the military, you've probably heard some statistics about military needs and and the issues that are happening. So certainly there is a vulnerability that comes when you join

the military and you have all of these missions and it's high stress and the hours are long. And then you have a spouse and young children in the mix and you're going on TDY, which is, you know, a temporary trip for a mission. And then you have different trainings you're going to away from home. So you can very quickly understand the needs that very often we have a front seat to these, especially when you're overseas away from your support group, away from extended family. So it is extremely important and we count it a very high privilege that we get to be there and open up our lives and our home to build relationships and try to enter in and just walk with them.

Angie Ward Yeah, you're a place and a source of stability in a highly changing high pressure environment, I think for them.

Rebecca Sneller Yeah, yeah.

Angie Ward Yeah. Well, Deric, without talking doctor speak, but I know you did your DMin thesis even on the impact of hospitality houses. And so, you know, we talked about why ministry to the military. What things have you guys seen and, you don't have to talk in doctor language but like in practical terms, what type of results and impacts have you seen as a result of your ministry there and others to the military?

Deric Sneller I could speak to you, just why is hospitality impactful in general? But then I could also speak to how it's impactful to the military community. And so I guess I'll just start with the first. I think hospitality is impactful because it's personal. You just can't get away from it. It's not a program, it's not hosting, it's not just having a potluck meal and consuming lots of caffeine together and hoping good things happen.

Angie Ward Yeah. It's not just a programmatic thing. I mean you have some programs. There are events.

Deric Sneller Yeah, there are programs. But if it's not personal, those programs really don't matter. And so hospitality is very much an expression and a welcome into life together. So I think that's how it's affective. That's how it changes everybody. It changes those who come and it changes us. So that's just a step back, I suppose that's true for all, regardless of the context. Yes.

Rebecca Sneller Well, and just to clarify, because the word hospitality has a lot that can be thrown around and has a lot of different definitions or implications. So maybe, you know, maybe for the sake of clarity, define or just give us a working definition of hospitality.

Angie Ward I'm guessing it's not "Martha Stewart" and having the right decor.

Rebecca Sneller Right. You ask someone, what is hospitality? It depends on who you're asking maybe.

Deric Sneller Yeah. And I think it's just welcoming in. And so the mission statement of cadence, which fits well here, is sharing the gospel and our lives. That's really their aim and that's what they excel at. And so why that is effective with the military community is, I think in part because, there's a few different reasons. One, they're uprooted, so they have very real relational needs. Hospitality is welcoming in the stranger. While there's a stranger element of I'm in a strange land and I desire to be seen, known and loved and welcomed. So there's something powerful there. Why hospitality is effective to the military is because the military, it's driven by the mission. And

you're just kind of part of a cog in the wheel. So to be a real person, not just a last name strip on your uniform or a Social Security number. And that's the other thing. When you age out of the military, they will replace you with somebody younger. So in the in the hospitality context, it's like, oh, we see you. And we know you and love you. And it has nothing to do with the mission. It's just you.

Angie Ward And I would guess the relationships go beyond, long beyond when they get, you know, transferred out or leave the military. Yeah, I see you both smiling. I'm sure there's many stories and memories there. Yeah. Let me ask, and Rebecca, I'll let you start. What are the challenges for you guys and for your family doing this kind of ministry and then doing it where you're located in Okinawa?

Rebecca Sneller Okay. I think the biggest challenge for me personally is being the stayer, being the one who stays.

Angie Ward As opposed to the leaver.

Rebecca Sneller Right. So you mentioned earlier that it's a highly transient population. They're only there 2 to 3 years, sometimes four or maybe five if they get an extension. But most of the time, the people that we are inviting into our home and in our lives and walking alongside, we're only going to get to walk with them for a year to three years. So that's probably the biggest challenge for me personally, I'd say probably for the entire family, but definitely for me. And I grew up an Army kid, so I'm used to saying goodbyes, I'm used to moving a lot. But it is very different being the one who is staying and saying goodbye. So that would probably be the biggest challenge. As a Christian, as someone who has this ministry call to keep investing, keep building relationships, keep the doors open, when sometimes your heart feels like this is really painful, I just want to close it off. This is a coping mechanism. I just want to stop this pain. So that's probably, just speaking very transparently, that's probably my biggest challenge is working through that. And then there's maybe some more practical challenges, as far as anyone who is in ministry raising children, it can sometimes feel like a fishbowl, you know, and just sometimes feel like you're on full display all the time. And we see the benefits of that. Also, again, coming back to our philosophy of ministry, sharing the gospel in our lives, we recognize people are going to see us parenting. They're going to see us.

Deric Sneller It's transparent.

Angie Ward And your marriage in action, right?

Rebecca Sneller Transparenting.

Angie Ward Wow. I mean, hospitality, that's part of the entering into your lives as well. Right?

Rebecca Sneller Right. It can feel very exposing at times, but also what an opportunity to let Christ be on display, you know, and even in the midst of me messing up as a mom or us not getting it right, you know, we can still, by the grace of God, we can still demonstrate the gospel in action. And we've received encouragement from mentors within Cadence who've raised their kids already in Cadence. And those words have just really impacted me as far as concepts like, you know, you can preach a sermon, you can teach a good Bible study, but oftentimes the most powerful ministry is going to be living out your role as mom in front of everybody, and that's powerful and that's a

good reminder. And then there's the practical challenge of just we live far away from our families. You know, and Okinawa is about a 26 hour journey to and from, door to door, to our families here in the States. So those are probably what I would consider my top challenges.

Angie Ward Yeah. Now you grew up an Army brat, right? So you kind of knew this lifestyle. What's something, Deric, that surprised you that also might be one or two things that most of us kind of on the home front or not in that military community or subculture, misunderstand about that world.

Rebecca Sneller Hmm. It's a good question.

Deric Sneller What do we misunderstand about that world?

Angie Ward Yeah. Or just don't understand. I mean, you know, I think the transience and you're helping us understand, I think, that whole thing. But was there anything else that was just like, wow, I didn't anticipate that.

Rebecca Sneller Well, can I just say just a side note while you think about the serious answer that, you know, with Top Gun Maverick having just come out? It's very fun to see all of the things floating around in the military community about how realistic that movie is.

Angie Ward Right. Right. You mean they don't just play volleyball on the beach or whatever it was this last time? And you can't just steal a jet?

Rebecca Sneller Yeah.

Deric Sneller Yeah. I am actually going to draw from my time here at Denver Seminary when I had CPE credit at the VA hospital and then I was a chaplain candidate in the Army at that time.

Angie Ward And the CPA is clinical pastoral education. Right. Yes.

Deric Sneller Thank you, yes. All these acronyms.

Angie Ward Denver Seminary is like the military. We have all sorts of them.

Deric Sneller Yeah, we're going to try to keep the acronyms to a minimum. But I remember both when I joined as a chaplain candidate and then during that time at the VA hospital, I realized the military is made up of all types of people. It's not just type A. I think I had this image in my head of everybody's driven go getters and it's like, well, everybody joins for different reasons and they all have a story and they all have different temperaments. And so that's where not putting all military people in a box, but especially in our ministry to get to know people's story and what's motivating them. Because also now and I think this has been true of every generation, but there's different trends. Different generations join for different reasons. And that's very true every time, but especially now.

Angie Ward Yeah. What can those of us who are listening and me talking with you, what can we learn about hospitality ministry and practice in our own context based on what you've learned and experienced? And obviously, many of us are not in that explicit military context. But I would guess there's a lot of principles that we can take with us from hospitality. What would you say?

Rebecca Sneller Well, Deric wrote a paper on that.

Angie Ward I think I read that paper and graduated that paper.

Deric Sneller Yeah, you did.

Angie Ward That was a softball question.

Deric Sneller For that I am grateful.

Rebecca Sneller I'll start since I'm not the expert, and then you can close the loop. I would say the biggest thing, and I do feel like there has been a lot of ink spilled over this lately, there's been a lot of conversation about hospitality and biblical hospitality. So I think this is probably not a new concept. But I will say it again, because I do think it's very important that hospitality is not the same as hosting or entertaining. So again, coming back to, let's define what hospitality is according to the biblical framework. We see that God is hospitable, you know, the gospel is inviting us in and we get to come alongside what God is doing. And so that's probably the biggest thing, and that's transformed my thinking in my eight years of being in hospitality ministry, is that it's not programmatic, it's not image, it's not having everything feel or look just right or having everything be perfect. It is just very simple, but it's not always easy, but it's just an opening up. I think space is important. Home is important. That is important, but it's not limited to that. It is an opening up of your life and an opening up of who you are to someone else making yourself available. So I think anybody, all of us can do that. Regardless of where we are. What stage we're in, if you're a college student, if you're already out in the workforce. Any of us can do that.

Angie Ward I think I'm hearing is that it's not even dependent on, now you have a hospitality house and that's part of your context, but you don't even have to have a house to be hospitable is what I'm gathering from that.

Rebecca Sneller Right, exactly. And I will say space is important. It's always really special. There's a certain vulnerability that comes and you can get to know people's stories so much better when you're in their home. So that is important, but it's not the only thing. It's not limited.

Angie Ward Yeah, there's the space even we have at this table between us, right, in relationship, right? Yeah. Deric, Dr. Sneller?

Deric Sneller She stole everything, but that's great.

Rebecca Sneller I read his paper.

Deric Sneller Yeah. I think when I started studying it, I thought, oh, add it to the list of things. Right. But then when I started jumping into the New Testament hospitality commands, I realized, Oh no, this isn't just one more thing. It's not an add on. This is a very practical expression of Christian love, and those hospitality commands appear in love commands. And so for me, that kind of removed all excuses for myself and others, of it's not a matter of gifting. Are you expressing Christian love in this very practical way? And yes, that's been said by many people really well. And it is about being hospitable. And what's beautiful about it is it doesn't have to look any one way. It can be done anywhere. It's about leading open, hospitable lives. And I think the

biggest obstacle for me and just in general is my calendar and my heart. Those are the two big things. I think there's external obstacles. You know, we could talk about all kinds of things, but that kind of ends up feeling like finger pointing or excuses or explaining away or something. I think most of the time it comes down to you. Am I allowing space on my calendar to live this way and invite others into my life? Or do I even want that? And so I think those are the two biggest obstacles, period. And I believe it was Henri Nouwen talked about how, well, he had a lot of great things to say on it in his book *Reaching Out*. But one of the things was when you invite people in, you see your interior world. And that is so true. You know, it's in sharing life with people that I'm like, oh, I see this side of myself. And I didn't see it before. And I don't necessarily care for that side, you know? And so there's that humbling piece. But that's also the transformative piece. That's where, yes, just like parenting, you feel like you're on full, full display, like your life is transparent, to continue the pun. But that's the transformational piece where you can be changed and others can be changed because there it is and the gospel has an opportunity to be presented.

Angie Ward Yeah, wow. I think it's easy to want everybody else to be hospitable and open and not for us to have that vulnerability. And I think about Saint Benedict and talking about hospitality, you know, welcoming everyone as they were Jesus Christ, you know, and I've had times where I've been hosting, but not necessarily hospitable in my life.

Deric Sneller And it becomes inhospitable.

Angie Ward Right. And so it's been a challenge to me going, am I truly welcoming these people? Inviting them in.

Rebecca Sneller Without grumbling.

Angie Ward Right. Yeah. And seeing them as Jesus in the image of God.

Rebecca Sneller Yeah. And just to elaborate on what Deric said, because there are transferable principles, which I think you could even list what you found in your research from that. There are things that can transfer, but also it can look very different. And so I just want to speak that into the podcast too, because I think a lot of us can think of hospitality has to look one way. Or it has to look like a big group. It has to look extroverted, it has to look X, Y and Z. You can fill in the blank.

Angie Ward Super planned, super orchestrated.

Rebecca Sneller Yes, and I am not an introvert, but I love so many introverts.

Deric Sneller Because you're an extrovert.

Rebecca Sneller Yeah, exactly. So I think they can sometimes feel well, I can't do that because that is in conflict with my temperament. And so I just want to speak that out into the podcast, that you can be an introvert and be extremely hospitable at the same time, because it is a heart posture and it is relational.

Deric Sneller And maybe this is getting ahead to another direction. But I think that's been the powerful thing of what we've seen result in many, not all military members, but we've seen many after they leave our hospitality house, they're leading hospitable lives, you know, and it's in their own way. Sometimes it's very quiet, but intentional, and they're forever changed. And others may

not yet be at that place to make that leap into leading hospitable lives. But they've benefited from hospitality. They've been seen, they've been known, they've been loved. And that's what they needed right then in that season of life.

Angie Ward Yeah. You've made an impression in their lives. Boy, this is so good. I just thank you guys for spending a little time here in the studio with me. I know you're in the middle of class. You're on a lunch break, Rebecca. And by the time people listen to this, you will be across the world again. But thanks for enlightening me and our listeners on the uniqueness that is military ministry and hospitality in the military and expanding our understanding and definition really of what hospitality is. And so, yeah, blessings on you as you continue your so important kingdom ministry there with Cadence and in military and hospitality ministry.

Rebecca Sneller Yeah. Thank you. Thanks so much for having us.