

## Engage360 Episode 109 | A Different Way of Doing Church; David Swenson

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

**Don Payne** [00:00:16] Hello, friends. This is Engage 360 from Denver Seminary. We're glad you've chosen to spend a little time with us again. My name is Don Payne, your host, and encouraged to bring before you a really, I think, encouraging and intriguing conversation today. Since the 2008 economic disaster, I've had the growing impression that the future of pastoral ministry may be increasingly bi-vocational. At the very least, we see constant creativity in the expressions of church and the pastoral ministry that supports it. And I expect that traditional forms of church and pastoring will probably be with us for a long time to come. But with the array of changes in both cultures and economies, pastoral leadership needs to be increasingly nimble and adaptive. What continues to excite me about Denver Seminary is that we have students preparing for and serving in both traditional and nontraditional forms of ministry, particularly pastoral ministry. So, we get to draw upon the historic models and at the same time adapt the wisdom in those models in ways that bring the gospel to people whose lives and journeys and questions place them sort of in the cracks or outside the lines of where traditional ministry forms aim their efforts. And our guest today has been working away quite effectively at both bi-vocational pastoral ministry and I think in a fairly creative form of church life. And I want you to hear about that journey, what he's learned and how that might prompt some creative, courageous ministry thinking in your setting, whatever that setting is. So, my friend David Swenson co-pastors a vibrant community of Christians called Coram Deo in the vicinity of the University of Denver, and their group has actually started dozens of house churches, I think dozens, it's fair to say. David, by the way, welcome.

**David Swenson** [00:02:22] Thanks Don.

**Don Payne** [00:02:24] Really, really glad you could spend some time with us. So, I think you've started dozens of house churches in the area. And David and his co-pastor, Matt Hulst, also started and continue to run a tutoring company called Thrive Tutoring.

**David Swenson** [00:02:41] Yep, that's it.

**Don Payne** [00:02:43] They hired lots of Denver Seminary students as tutors, so the benefits of their approach are quite broad. David has a background in physics and math and completed an M.A. and Theology here at Denver Seminary a few years ago. And his wife Katie also completed an M.A. in counseling here. And I know you, and I think this is true of Matt as well, have a background with YWAM in Hawaii. Were you both in Hawaii?

**David Swenson** [00:03:08] Yeah. I mean, you're never quite in one place for a long time with YWAM, but I'd say YWAM Kona was our home base for most of it.

**Don Payne** [00:03:18] Okay. Well, first, David, tell us a bit about your church community, how it got started, how it works, etc.

**David Swenson** [00:03:25] Oh, boy. That's a dangerously open-ended question. Yeah, I'll try and be as brief as I can. I mean, the community really started by Matt and Tanya a couple of years before we even got here, and Matt and Tan were kind of living out this, Matt likes to call it a

missionary-ish lifestyle where the lines are blurred between traditional paid ministry and, like we're talking about today, bi-vocational kind of roles. And Matt had, as you just implied, about a decade of experience working all over the world with YWAM and I think brought with him when he moved back stateside and settled down, got married, he started teaching in some schools here in Denver for income, or bi vocational income, and he really just couldn't shake that missionary identity that had been so imprinted on him in his twenties. And I think there's lots of people out there who have these pretty formational leadership experiences with para church organizations. And inherently there's an impulse embedded in those organizations where missiology is at the forefront and ecclesiology is kind of the caboose that you figure out at the end. And it's sometimes a little underdeveloped, maybe even in a negative way. But at the very least the order is really clear. Ecclesiology trails missiology, rather than in local church contexts, even if at the beginning of a church plant, missiology is at the forefront, after a generation or two of people have cycled through, now ecclesiology is kind of the thing and the structures. And systems that have been passed on become the thing. So, yeah. Matt and Tan, in some sense, I would say accidentally started the church because they were just trying to reach college students and create a space for them, you know, especially college students who wouldn't show up to even a really healthy, traditional, Sunday centric American church. So, after a couple of years of doing that, they started to realize that they needed a team and needed help. So, they kind of prayerfully sent out an invite to a handful of friends. And Katie and I were lucky to be on the list, and we were in a time of transition. We had been working in YWAM about six years directing, discipleship training schools, their kind of six-month intensive program. And we were contemplating a move long term overseas and we're quite honestly sitting in Nepal one night and discussing options and praying through options. And my wife threw out this idea of moving here to attend Denver Seminary and get her counseling degree. And I somewhat sarcastically, yeah, I was pretty resistant to even entertaining the idea. And the next morning we woke up after kind of praying, going to bed, and Matt sent this invite for us to move here and church plant with them. So, my wife is far more discerning and wise than I am. So that was really the impetus of it. And again, like I said, we didn't have a master plan playbook, we didn't have a denominational backing, we didn't have a sending church. We very quickly, in the process of planting a community, knew that we wanted to be kind of connected. And so, we had a deep friendship and relationship with a network of communities associated with actually a prayer movement called 24/7 Prayer based out of the UK. They have a pretty broad network in the US as well. And so, we just kind of hitched our wagon up with them. And they're again like, you're even alluding to, there's a lot of these thinking outside the box from traditional denominational lines, and I'd say 24/7 prayer gathers communities on more value basis than even theological doctrinal basis. So, the tent pegs are pretty wide for some of that, but it's more value centric and trying to integrate certain values that have been held by many denominations in church history. So, things like the charismatic, the contemplative, social justice. So how do we gather communities who are like minded in trying to integrate those values rather than just, you know, unilateral confessional belief in all these doctrines alone. And obviously, doctrine does come into play inevitably, but it doesn't maybe take the leading role.

**Don Payne** [00:08:02] Tell us a little bit about how Coram Deo functions. You have kind of a centralized group, but you really put a lot of your energy into the house churches. Is that right?

**David Swenson** [00:08:13] Yeah, absolutely. And on some level, it's complex and more or less every year, whoever was kind of functioning in the role of core leadership and really functioning as an elder for that year, we would gather and have a pretty long, drawn out process of discernment and dialog and reflection on the year before and then really pray into that year. And stumbling at times, admittedly, we would take our best stab at maybe a redirection we should move in or

changes we should make. So, some of the structures and models have quite honestly changed six or seven times in about five years. Where we're currently at, well, what has always been true is we've always tried to emphasize that the primary organizing structure for our church is smaller communities. Typically, they gather in homes, they might not even be called house churches. You might call the small groups; you might call the missional community. You know, there's a lot of semantics and kind of churchy lingo that we need to define. But at the core, we would just believe that your primary church community should be the number of relationships that you can actually form a true deep attachment with. And when all of those smaller groups get together, that's actually not church. Maybe it's a seminar, maybe it's training, maybe it's really awesome. Maybe it's a big celebration and party. But you're really only living as an organism of the church with people who you can really know their lives and form real relationship with.

**Don Payne** [00:09:57] Okay, now you mentioned teaching, and I know you do a good bit of teaching in that model. And even if doctrine is not maybe the most explicit lead in the presentation, I mean you've got an MA in theology and you're richly, vigorously, theologically minded. I know you do a lot of teaching, so tell us how that functions.

**David Swenson** [00:10:23] Yeah. Similarly, there have been some different iterations over the years. So, there are times where we have gathered every other week corporately with all these smaller communities, and there have been seasons where we didn't gather at all for upwards of five or six months corporately, and people were only gathering in homes on a weekly basis during that period. So, it's ebbed and flowed a lot. When we hold public gatherings, there is always a component of teaching or training, and sometimes that's more expository or kind of narrative theology pulling from scripture. Sometimes it's more extra biblical, theological, or, you know, maybe we're teaching on spiritual disciplines or a rule of life, things that have proved very effective and fruitful in the life and history of the church, but aren't inherently, you know, chapter verse, preaching sermons like is kind of the traditional norm in Protestant churches. So, yeah, I definitely have held the central role as probably one of the primary teachers along with Matt. And then we've also, as a part of our built-in leadership development models where we're continually trying to provide opportunities and training to develop other people's leadership gifts, we do try to share that space a lot. So, I mean, the simple reality is, as much as I probably could just give long monologues and long trainings and sermons, many years, I might only be giving ten sermons in an entire year, maybe less. And I have run learning labs or cohorts where maybe I even record teachings just for that cohort. And we might post that digitally on our website or on our podcast or things like that.

**Don Payne** [00:12:11] So your teaching takes a number of different forms. It's not just one set predictable delivery modality.

**David Swenson** [00:12:19] Right. Yeah, definitely not. And even the distinguishment between more of a workshop environment where you're kind of training and interacting with the group, or a cohort space versus a traditional monologue of, you know, a delivered sermon preaching or teaching publicly.

**Don Payne** [00:12:34] What's the primary constituency? Do you still have a lot of university students or young adults primarily? What's your demographic?

**David Swenson** [00:12:42] Yeah, it's definitely ebbed and flowed over the years and a lot of factors have played into that, but, I mean, in this current season, on some metrics, it feels like a really

small community. I think nationally in America, we're probably right at the average size of an American church of over 80 people, and that's not even really counting kids. So, in terms of how it feels, it feels like a pretty small community. But obviously there have been seasonality to that, especially in a city like Denver, where people come and are a part maybe for a few years and then jobs or life stage takes them elsewhere.

**Don Payne** [00:13:23] A fair bit of turnover?

**David Swenson** [00:13:24] Yeah, a fair bit. But there's a common core of probably 30 to 35 of us who have really held the DNA of the community over the last three or four years. And increasingly, our demographic is young. Some young families and then kind of single working professionals. So, we have a handful of people with gray hair in the community and increasingly a lot of littles under ten. But yeah, we'd love to see it long term continue to grow in that diversity of even generationally there.

**Don Payne** [00:14:00] So what keeps you at this form of ministry? Why would you commend this to other people to think about ministry this way?

**David Swenson** [00:14:11] Oh, wow. The first thought that comes to my head, I was so, well, let me give a little couple of comments on context, so, really, especially in this last year, Matt and I have shifted a lot of our time and energy to developing and organizing what we'd call a leadership pathway for our community. And increasingly, as we look to the next few years, we see that our primary role for this kind of odd church is to steward the development of leaders and then release them into whatever sense of calling the Lord is speaking to them. So rather than trying to program things from the top down for our community, trying to really seed dreams and ideas from underneath and then get behind people and support them in creating those things. And some of those may not fall under the umbrella of official ministerial communities or church plants or things like that. They might be businesses or entrepreneurship ideas. And then we do hope to cultivate very explicitly and specifically the multiplication of healthy, diverse communities that some people might call house churches. Some people might call them missional communities, micro churches. There's a lot of different words for it, but I think, with that context, I think the part that I love about what we've created for all of its flaws and stumbling along the way is there isn't a single thing we do that I don't believe in, that I don't believe is meaningful, valuable, that I wouldn't do for free, to be honest. And I just think that's increasingly the older I get and the more relationships with people in different forms of ministry, and I say this with all humility, but the more rare I feel like that is. I encounter people who consistently feel like their time and energy and resources is being absorbed and soaked up by things they at best call a necessary evil or something. It's just a collateral effect of the bigger good thing they believe in. But now, you know, they have to do this. And obviously we all have to do things that we don't love. We mow the lawn; we take out the trash. We all have to. There's an element of being in a responsible adult where we do things we don't want to sometimes. But I think, I just, I was driving up to a pastor's retreat back in December, and I was listening to a talk by a guy who's been, he's kind of a friend for me, he's a close friend and mentor for Matt, but his name's Hugh Holter. He is a pretty well-known voice and has authored a handful of books kind of in the missional church movement, which, you know, for many people was maybe a flash in the pot. It was kind of a cool thing to talk about for a few years. And it's fizzled off the radar. We're not talking about it anymore. But I'm listening to this interview by a guy named Bryan Sanders down at the Tampa underground of Hugh Holter. And he's just talking about his life. He's talking about this journey of 40 years of bi-vocational ministry. He's talking about the ups and the downs, the seasons of scarcity and fear, the seasons of provision and

joy, and I just start weeping in my truck, driving up to this retreat. And I'm just overwhelmed with gratitude that I feel like some I have a handful of relationships and people showed me a way to do ministry where I feel like I haven't had to sacrifice my integrity and purity of heart.

**Don Payne** [00:18:09] That's wonderful to hear.

**David Swenson** [00:18:11] And it just feels like such a gift. And I can say that if I had heard the podcast a year ago, I probably wouldn't have cried because the last five years of building a business while planting a community, while figuring out all the complexities with that has at times not been very fun or at times I've wondered, am I crazy? Is this ever going to work? Should I have become a biomedical engineer like I was planning to 14 years ago, you know? And so, doubts and seasons of, again, not hardship with a capital H, but for sure seasons of wondering, is this even possible? Does this work? Is this a good idea for anyone to do? And I think really last fall was kind of a culminating factor of a handful of tributaries kind of forming together in one river where I can say wholeheartedly, I'm in love with what I do. I can't believe that I've fallen into this lifestyle of ministry bi-vocationally.

**Don Payne** [00:19:16] I love hearing that. How have you seen God work in people's lives in ways that might be unique to this model of church? I mean, because you mentioned a little bit earlier on that early on, you know, a lot of folks were showing up who might not have shown up in even a healthy traditional church. What have you seen God do that seems to be unique to this model?

**David Swenson** [00:19:42] Yeah, that's a good question. One of the first things that comes to my mind is I think the longer we do this, the greater sense of humility I feel and the greater I think, the more acutely I feel aware that we need diversity in the church because people's discipleship journeys through different life stages are inherently diverse and complex. And I think the more we see the diversity of model and structure and, you know, worship style and organs versus electric guitars and fog machines versus living room worship, the more we embrace that diversity, really what we're doing is framing it positively to see that we can reach more people of different temperaments, personalities, preferences and in more stages of life and development. And yeah, I mean, I think our community has always been diverse, but there have been a few kind of themes, you might say, that pop up in people's stories who stumble into our community. And I think there's a handful who have never been involved in a traditional church at all. And I think what we're doing feels unexpected and authentic and, you know, taps into some of these kind of classic millennial values, which that's why that has been a people group that I think have been drawn to this. And I think there's been a whole group of people who honestly are really high level gifted leaders who gave their twenties to these more organizational, traditional models, and they left it on the other side feeling a little disillusioned or questioning what it was all for or what it was all worth, and looking around wondering where are the real relationships and attachments that actually, you know, what was that for? What other than serving someone else's big organizational vision statement and mission? And now again, even if, let's assume nothing traumatic or negative or manipulative or coercive or really damaging even happened. But they get to the other side and feel like, what was that for? And obviously, I think there can be some healthy reframing of some of that. And there's, of course, lots of positives that they can be coached to see and draw out. So yeah, I think that those are two of the biggest themes we've seen, and I think part of what seems to be really exciting when it starts to click for people is what we're inviting them into is an entirely new way to live and to understand their family and their job and their vocation. And in some ways, you know, Coram Deo, this kind of nerdy old Latin phrase that I think I picked up in in Dave Buschart's church history class or something here. And then it just stuck with me, and we ended

up naming the community after it, but it means before the face of God. And fundamentally, what I think our model, kind of the sacred cow we are going after fundamentally is the division of secular and sacred, which plays right hand-in-glove into the division of laity and professional Christian. And I think inherently we are trying to create a model that, from every conscious and subconscious angle, is putting the members of this community square in the face of this reality that they are the priesthood of all believers. They are the saints who are to be equipped for the work of ministry. And the professionalization of ministry that's happened in the 20th century in America, I think, is tragic. Where pastors see themselves as a professional, just like someone might see themselves as a professional accountant or a professional doctor, you know. And it's seen kind of in this really this inherent dualism that separates ministry to the people we pay to do that. And so, from top to bottom front to back the first day we started meeting as a community till today, I think that is the core thing we're trying to see transform in people's minds. And then it feels like we just get to step back and see, oh wow, what's going to happen now that that paradigm shift has happened for them? And I mean, that's a big thing we go after in this new leadership pathway we've created. We have a 101, a 201, and a 301 cohort. And to go through all of them would probably take you 2 to 3 years. And in a sense, I would say that 2-to-3-year process, that's our membership class. And we don't even have church membership, we don't call it that. But I would say you're not probably really building the church in Denver, orienting your life around bringing the Kingdom of God to bear in your family, your neighborhood, your workplace, your life, until you've grappled really deeply with some of these key theological ideas and paradigms. And again, I kind of poked fun at it earlier, a de-emphasis on orthodoxy. But again, by that I don't mean a de-emphasis on thinking theologically and reflectively on the story of God. I mean a shift from gatekeeping based on doctrine as kind of the front thing that is prioritized rather than paradigms and core values leading the way and even core practices.

**Don Payne** [00:25:48] Well, you know, it sounds like that actually could be a staging for a church body to have a more integrated approach between its confessional theology and its practiced or lived theology.

**David Swenson** [00:26:02] Yeah, 100%.

**Don Payne** [00:26:03] Which, of course, you know, I mean, you and I are both theologians, so we both love theology. I mean, we both can nerd out on that to no end.

**David Swenson** [00:26:11] Yeah, we need more than a half hour for that.

**Don Payne** [00:26:13] Yeah, we do. And at the same time recognize that there's often a huge gap between any group's stated theology and their implicit or enacted embodied lived theology. And sometimes the more emphasis placed on that explicit stated theology, the less attention we play to whether that's actually enacted in our ways of being. Organizationally. So, I can see how that could be a good set up for just a more integrated approach between what we believe and how we actually live. You know, I'm curious, David, what are some of the things you and Matt have learned along the way in the years. How many years have you been on the team?

**David Swenson** [00:27:00] We Yeah, we started it together. We moved here fall of 2016 and I guess we kind of had a core group of about 12 that met for a while. So, just over five years of formally gathering.

**Don Payne** [00:27:15] What are some of the things you've learned along the way, how things changed?

**David Swenson** [00:27:20] I think a big one is I mean, there's been a lot of personal change just through the vulnerability of trying to start something. And, you know, when you were talking there about confessional versus embodied or functional versus confessional theology, I think, I haven't thought about that comparison in a handful of years, but I think in some ways everything we do is built on the premise of trying to collapse that gap. So, an example of something we learned that speaks to that very thing is we talk a lot in our 201, which is kind of our leadership development cohort. It's a 12-week cohort that I run. And to enter it, you have to have done the one on one and then you have to have tried leading something, even if it was for like a month or six months and it totally failed. But you have to have tried to lead something, to even, that's the ticket price to be in the conversation and play. And one of the first things that we hit really hard in the first session is this difference between positional leadership and relational leadership or positional authority and relational authority, which on some level strikes a chord with me of that idea of confessional versus functional, where it's one thing to be hired into a position or be assigned a role and given a title of authority over other people where you are carrying a level of responsibility and influence, for better or worse, on those people's lives. It's a whole different thing for some person relationally to look at you and, implicit or explicit, know that you have authority in their life because you've really earned it, because there's such depth and substance and integrity. Not that you're a perfect person, but in the trust and relational fabric that's going on there. And obviously there comes a time and place where we need to organize, and we need to give positional authority or give titles and roles because otherwise it's confusing who's doing what and it's going to make a big mess. But I think any time positional authority outshines or eclipses relational authority, you're going to have big problems. And I think we have inherently, in this effort to collapse that gap of confessional and functional, at every turn, we are continually pushing people, you know, they come to a church often, and there's a time and place to just say, hey, you're a small group leader, good luck, and get your first dose of leadership experience. Or hey, let's hire an intern and give them a title in a role even though, yeah, they haven't fully earned it, they don't even know these people yet. So, there's a time and place for that. But we've really pushed to almost let proven-ness be demonstrated and shown. And someone comes to us and says, hey, I want to lead a group. Well, again, in our model, we don't have sign ups. We don't we don't organize all the groups and post them on the website for people to sign up for it. That person who says, hey, I want to lead a group, we'd say, well, who in your life do you have impact and influence on? Who looks up to you? Who trusts you? Who have you earned that with? What's something you could go lead and do with them first? And at some point along the way, yes, maybe we do need to give a position or a role or a title, but we're always pushing people to try and let the functional reality of what's going on here actually lead, and then we'll come in behind and we'll name it, we'll organize it, we'll structure it, we'll confess it, you know, with our lips and our cognition. And I just think that saved us at so many turns from elevating people to positional spots before they were ready.

**Don Payne** [00:31:22] Well, it should be no surprise that that sounds remarkably like some of the patterns we see in the New Testament. Some of those laid out in Paul's letters.

**David Swenson** [00:31:31] Yeah. Which sounds kind of obvious when you hear Paul say like, don't appoint someone as a leader until there's, you know, a proven-ness, whether it's of moral character or biblical integrity, or pick your facet of character and human development. But it's one thing to hear Paul just say that. It's another thing to think through how would that affect the way

we organize our churches, especially in a modern environment where the church has become so organizationally driven and professionally driven and have H.R. departments and hiring and firing? It's cultures apart from that environment that Paul was speaking in.

**Don Payne** [00:32:11] Yeah, big time. Well, David, if people want to learn more either about what you're doing with Coram Deo or about this kind of ministry model, do you have any resources you'd recommend or places you'd point them to?

**David Swenson** [00:32:25] There's a couple that come to mind. There's some dear friends of ours, a guy named John Peterson and Ken Junkie. They run a podcast and have a nonprofit ministry. They're based out of Castle Rock. It's called City Table. And they are, I think, they're mentors and kind of spiritual dads to me and Matt and I think really have been leading the way of thinking about some of these things for the last few decades. And the other community that I would point people to, they've just had such a deep impact on me this last year, especially. They're called the Tampa Underground. They have a beautiful origin story. They've been around close to 20 years now, and they were started by about a group of 50 former InterVarsity college campus ministry people who started a church with kind of some of the same values and ideas that I'm talking about here. And they have a really great just for, if you just want to feel inspired and get your faith stoked a little. They've a great documentary called Underground People. You can find it on Vimeo.

**Don Payne** [00:33:33] Okay. Yeah, that's great. David Swenson, so good to see you again and catch up and hear in kind of an encapsulated version what the Lord's been doing through you guys. Just so thrilled about that and really proud of you guys. Thank you for spending time with us.

**David Swenson** [00:33:54] Yeah, of course. Thanks for having me, Don.

**Don Payne** [00:33:56] Yeah. Friends this has been engage360 and need to remind you, I don't do this often enough, that if you want full transcripts of our interviews, those are available on the seminary website which is [DenverSeminary.edu](http://DenverSeminary.edu), and you can simply do search for or find engage 360. And if you look at any of the episode links on our website, you'll find full transcripts available there, even if you listen to the podcast on another platform. I would encourage you, as I know everybody says this, but it really does make a difference if you get a chance to give us a rating or review that helps raise the profile and get us exposure a bit more broadly because we'd love to serve as many people as we can. Remember also, you can email us questions, Comments, [Podcast@DenverSeminary.Edu](mailto:Podcast@DenverSeminary.Edu) is our email address and we would love to hear how we can serve you in some way. Do visit our website for other resources. [DenverSeminary.edu](http://DenverSeminary.edu). Friends until the next episode, hope that the Lord encourages you and gives you fresh and courageous ministry ideas wherever you are and however you are serving. Take care.