

Engage360 Episode 110 | Exploring Life after Retirement; Richard and Leona Bergstrom

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] Friends, welcome again to Engage360 at Denver Seminary. My name is Don Payne, your host. We are again grateful for you spending a little bit of time with us. Let's dive right into our topic for this episode. Lots of research and conversation have gone into the value and the importance of multigenerational ministry approaches, and into particular generations like Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z. Currently, there may not be as much cutting-edge research interest in the baby boomer generation, but that is part of multi-generational ministry. Demographically, boomers are those born between 1946 and 1964. So right now, boomers are those between the ages of 59 and 77. The Pew Research Center noted that baby boomers have always had an outsized presence compared with other generations. They peaked at 78.8 million in 1999 and remained the largest living adult generation until 2019. Now, we're not here in this episode to talk specifically about multigenerational ministry, but about what's going on with boomers that warrants unique attention as they seek to flourish in this stage of life when many think they've been put out to pasture, so to speak, and when the church doesn't always know how to equip them and to draw on all that God has given them. So, our guests to help us in that conversation are Richard and Leona Bergstrom, who formed a ministry called Re-Ignite. I'll give you their website later. And through that ministry, they seek to help boomers make an impact on the world. So, I want to welcome the two of you. Richard, Leona, glad to have you on Engage360.

Leona Bergstrom [00:01:59] Thank you.

Richard Bergstrom [00:02:00] Thanks and great to be with you, Don.

Don Payne [00:02:03] Actually, Richard is a Denver seminary graduate from 1976, so it's good to have an alum with us. Always good to talk to folks who've walked these hallowed halls. And I think I first saw you, if I'm not mistaken, when you participated in one of our In Perspective webinars a year or two ago. Is that correct? Were you with us?

Richard Bergstrom [00:02:24] That's right.

Don Payne [00:02:26] I thought so. Well, it's good to see you again. The Bergstroms have spent over 40 years in ministries of various sorts, pastoral, consulting, writing, speaking. So, they bring a wealth of experience and research to the question of how those in the baby boomer age bracket can be fully engaged as members of Christ's body and mission. And they've actually produced a number of books I'll tell you about, where they've dealt with various issues facing boomers. Their first book, I think, was called "Amazing Grays: Unleashing the Power of Age in Your Congregation." That's from 2000. And then "Third Calling: What Are You Doing with the Rest of Your Life?" from 2016. And most recently, their book, "Emerging: Boomers Speak Out About Life in and Beyond the Pandemic," from 2022. Let's kick off the conversation this way. What prompted you to write your most recent book, Emerging? Why is this an important message now?

Richard Bergstrom [00:03:29] Well, we really felt like something needed to be said about this whole topic. And part of it was our own need to process the events of COVID in our lives and the isolation that occurred with that and all of the various implications for life and ministry and work. So, it was our own exercise in dealing with the pandemic and its impact.

Leona Bergstrom [00:04:01] I'll add, we started really optimistically writing this thing in 2021 as we were hearing our peers deal with all the issues of not being able to see their grandparents or not feeling purpose and all the things we were feeling. So being that we always would write in response to what we were experiencing and what our peers were experiencing, we thought, well, we'll write about that. Because everything's looking really good, right? And then those variants came, and we realized we had nothing to say. We didn't have any answers. And we just kept processing it for really a whole other year. So, writing it,

writing a book is an expression of some of our own processing of what the pandemic meant in our lives, in our ministry, in our family. And then what really capstoned it was listening to other people's stories and realizing how not one person on this globe was not affected by the pandemic and that we needed to tell those stories. We needed to process together. We needed to move forward together, not just as a globe, but as a generation, and to figure out some of these things. So, some of it comes out of our own processing, our own difficulties through that period of time and what it brought together as a generation.

Don Payne [00:05:21] Yeah, well, overall, how have you seen the pandemic affect boomers? You hinted at this maybe just a little bit in your previous comments, Leona, but how have you seen the pandemic affect boomers, maybe in some unique ways?

Richard Bergstrom [00:05:37] Well, the boomers were affected uniquely in that many respects, we were the first generation, and maybe our parents are still living to be kind of sidelined by the pandemic, you know? Nobody wanted to kill their grandparents by hanging out with them and giving them COVID. And so, there was this, what Leona has called a line in the sand that was drawn with a certain age that said, you know, more vulnerable, stay away, protect them. And so many of the stories that we captured in our book had to do with boomers whose relationships with their families were impacted, with their grandchildren, not being able to be with them, with their plans for retirement. All the different aspects that were unique to that generation were impacted by COVID.

Leona Bergstrom [00:06:34] I remember I wrote a blog about it because all of a sudden, you know, we're the big, mighty boomers. We're going to change the world always. All of a sudden, they're drawing a line around us, saying they're elderly, they're vulnerable.

Don Payne [00:06:49] Don't get close to them, right?

Leona Bergstrom [00:06:51] Yeah, we wanted to be well, but we certainly didn't want to be called elderly and vulnerable. So, I think that was one thing that boomers kind of experienced, was suddenly we were that group. Another thing, I think in talking with others, we really began to feel our mortality. Oh, sure, we were someday going to die, but suddenly our own friends. We lost family to COVID. We had that possibility. If we didn't do this right, we could die from COVID. So, you really came face to face with mortality. And one more thing I'd just add. Technology became a grand change in our lives. We were always comfortable with our computers and our iPhones and iPads and all those. But suddenly everything depended on technology. That was huge for our generation.

Don Payne [00:07:50] Yeah. It kind of escalated everything to new levels of intensity and new levels of need and dependency, didn't it? When I got the conversation going, I had mentioned that lots of boomers, at least now, since many boomers are retired or getting close to retirement, one of the key questions that lots of boomers are asking is what you've written about already. You know, what do I do now? What do I do with the rest of my life? And many boomers experience a sense of being kind of on the bench in their church ministries and not knowing where their value is in ministry. I'm going to assume that that's an ongoing struggle for lots of boomers in lots of churches anyway. But did you see in your observations, your interviews, did you see the pandemic accelerating that, exacerbating that which was already a struggle?

Richard Bergstrom [00:08:52] Yes. Even in normal times, you know, that transition into so-called retirement where you reach a stage of you're stepping away from a career, a profession, or your work life, you enter into this unknown, this great abyss of uncertainty. And it can become a difficult transition for people when so much of their identity has been tied up in their work or their career. And even for pastors, you know, in churches, their identity is very much tied up in that role. And so, I heard an interesting podcast recently by a gentleman from up in Canada that talked about these four different phases of retirement. And initially, it's kind of a lost feeling. And until they get to the point where they realize they're going to have to kind of reinvent this phase of their life and reengage in serving others and community, that it can be a real time of isolation and a lack of structure, a lack of meaning in their lives.

Leona Bergstrom [00:09:58] You've also seen boomers easily leave the church because it was really easy to do online, and we could go all over the place, and we could visit all kinds of churches. And we've talked with pastors who say they're not coming back for whatever reason. We're still exploring some of those church boomer issues.

Don Payne [00:10:20] Do you think it's the case that of all the people who have not come back, are the boomers predominant in that group?

Richard Bergstrom [00:10:29] Well, I think that one of the factors simply has been the safety factor with COVID is that older adults, being more vulnerable or more susceptible to health implications might have been the slowest to return. And besides that, with the increased emphasis, legitimate emphasis, on reaching families and reaching younger, that many of our peers have felt somewhat set aside by their churches. And some specific cases come to mind where maybe the volume has gone up and the lights have gone down and it's much more dynamic and aggressive form of worship on their gatherings. And so, many of them that we know personally have kind of hived off from their local church and found another place to land, if at all.

Leona Bergstrom [00:11:29] I think on a positive note, though, Richard has uncovered, too, some churches that have been innovative in bringing generations together through this pandemic and mentoring and, you know, online conversations and reaching out to the generations in unique ways. So, it hasn't all been bad. It's been fertile ground for innovation.

Don Payne [00:11:51] I'd be curious to know, just in a really broad sense, what your ministry with boomers overall encompasses, what you're seeing, what some of the unique challenges are you're facing, what stories of encouragement you have that would really help mobilize, give a new vision, perhaps to many church leaders as they minister to boomers and try to equip them.

Richard Bergstrom [00:12:18] Our biggest theme, as reflected in our earlier book, "Third Calling," was to basically challenge the dominant paradigm of retirement as leisure. And we wrote this book in Surprise, Arizona, where we holed up for a month back in 2016. And all around us, we could see evidence of this retirement paradigm. You know, your day consists of golfing, pickleball, tennis, biking, walking. Any number of great things to do. But our challenge is that leisure as an end in itself is not the goal. It's a byproduct of living a meaningful, spiritual life. And so even though we also enjoy many of those same leisure activities, it's not our ultimate purpose in life. And it's a huge challenge to challenge that that retirement paradigm, because the culture and the economy has so reinforced it. This is what you're here for now, is to play and enjoy the fruits of your labor. But one example of that, I interviewed a pastor down in Sun City during the writing of this book, and he talked about a Christian gentleman who retired and came to Arizona, and he golfed seven days a week, and ultimately kind of came to the end of himself and went to his pastor and just asked for some counsel. And he basically kind of realigned his life around some more spiritual values. He still golfed, but it wasn't the end all of his life. It wasn't the total focus of his life.

Leona Bergstrom [00:13:55] To camp on that. The focus of our ministry is to kind of go back to individual boomers and say, how did God create you? What is unique about you? Your strengths, your spiritual gifts, your motivations, your talents, all those things that make you the wonderful person God's designed you to be. Now, in this new stage of life, what are you passionate about and how is God going to use you in a new way in this new stage of life? So technically, we do it through our writing, but we've also done retreats and online education and seminars and that kind of thing to try to help individuals grasp that unique calling, that third calling.

Don Payne [00:14:38] Okay. Has anything about your approach changed because of the pandemic? Tell us about that.

Richard Bergstrom [00:14:48] Well, aside from the fact that in 2018, we actually had recorded our retreat curriculum and put it online as a video course, which was ahead of COVID, not anticipating that online and

virtual activity would become the norm. But at the same time, we've had to, of course, travel and speaking in retreats all dried up during COVID. So, like everyone, we had to, to use an overused word, pivot and go online with Zoom meetings and retreats and webinars and things like that. But people are starting to come back, and some engagements are starting to resume. But just like the seminary and other institutions have had to modify their approach in this online era, so have we.

Don Payne [00:15:41] Have you found it to be the case that because of the pandemic, many people in the retirement phase of life have had to alter the way they find that new output of life, that new sense of meaning and direction, that sense of ministry. Have they had to change that because of the pandemic?

Richard Bergstrom [00:16:07] Yes. And a lot of those stories are interwoven between the chapters of our book. But one that comes to mind is a woman, using a pseudonym, Priscilla, she retired in Southern California just before COVID hit. And so, she had all these plans for travel and involvement in her church and opportunities to serve. And they all evaporated. And so, she had to work through that vacuum during the pandemic. And now, I assume, and I hope is beginning to come out of that and reengage, but it really shut down a lot of people's plans and priorities for an extended period of time.

Don Payne [00:16:48] Yeah, I can imagine.

Leona Bergstrom [00:16:49] I think that people our age had time to reflect. Everybody had more time to reflect. And what do we do with these precious moments and years of our lives if we are given those back to us after many of us thought they would be snuffed out? And so, we have to deal with some of the grief that we all experienced. We lost a lot during that pandemic, not just our health, but individual systems, relationships. And to acknowledge that grief and be leaders and elders in this matter, going forth in healing and in creating new structures and creating new relationships. I think that's been our main challenge. We're not excited necessarily to go back to the big conferences or the big things, are we so much? But to help individuals really find what God has done in their lives, even through the pandemic and still wants to do in their lives in the future, that he's not done with us yet. We said on the back of the book that, yeah, I always loved what we wrote on the back of the book. I don't know. I said, we're not done nor are we done in. On the contrary, we're stronger, more resolute, more committed to finding renewed faith and purpose. We are emerging and we're trying to make that a forward movement from the pandemic into the future.

Richard Bergstrom [00:18:15] Absolutely.

Don Payne [00:18:16] Have you found any, one or two things that have been most effective in helping people find that fresh new chapter of life, that fresh new vision? And I'm asking on behalf of a lot of church leaders who would love, they're walking alongside lots of people in those retirement years and really want to know how to help them find that next chapter, that next division.

Richard Bergstrom [00:18:43] Well, you know, for many years our focus was on senior adult programming. We took on the road nationally and locally, kind of in tandem, to try to program things for older adults, 55 plus second half ministry, third third, whatever you want to call it. We have totally shifted our focus to target the individual message, head, and heart, and to try to get inside the heads and the hearts of older adults to challenge them with a vision for this phase of their life. The society, the culture may not offer to them, and frankly, the church may not at all times offer that vision to older adults because they themselves perhaps don't have the vision for that stage of life. And they don't understand that it can still be a productive, meaningful time, whether it's through volunteerism, service of some kind or another, but just trying to instill within the individual this vision for purpose and meaning. But they have to take responsibility for it because they're not always getting it from the people or the institutions that surround them, and particularly not the culture.

Leona Bergstrom [00:20:01] And always with the caveat that is usually when it's God given, it will serve others. It will mean loving others, reaching to the next generations. It's not self-serving, but the passion will

be to make a difference in the lives of other people. And that's when people come alive, is when they realize God's not done with them.

Don Payne [00:20:26] Have you experienced lots of older adults being very insecure about or very doubtful about whether they have anything that would be of benefit to the next generations?

Richard Bergstrom [00:20:39] Oh, absolutely. I think that's kind of the dominant understanding or perception that they have. And getting over that takes some real understanding and some reaching out, I think, to try to involve yourself in the next generation. So, there's some great models of this even in the culture. I think of Civic Ventures that became Encore that's now become CoGen under Marc Friedman out in the Bay Area has kind of led the culture in this and they have really attempted to lay a vision, cast a vision for older adults' involvement in and mentoring the next generations. Mark Friedman wrote a book called "How to Live Forever," which sounds like a seminary theological book, but it's really about older adults. It's about older adults investing in the next generations because it's not coming from a faith basis per se, but from a cultural basis.

Don Payne [00:21:42] Oh, good recommendation. Your book emerging is a collection of interviews, right? A collection of stories based on interviews you had.

Richard Bergstrom [00:21:54] The interviews are interspersed between the chapters to try to, as best possible, illustrate what we're talking about in the chapters. And so, for me, that was my part in the book as well as some of the chapters, but so fascinating to actually invite people to assert survey online and then invited them to an interview beyond that and then just created a narrative for each of those stories to try to help people see what this was like for their peers. And it's fascinating to see the breadth of perspective and of, frankly, conviction about everything from politics to the pandemic. Because, as you know, we're a divided country. And many are divided over some of the issues that arose during COVID.

Don Payne [00:22:45] So what do you think is one of the most compelling stories that came out of all that?

Richard Bergstrom [00:22:52] Actually, my most fascinating story was the gentleman we met on an airplane in January of 2020 on our way to Denver. We got to talking about older adult issues because he was in the nursing home industry and responsible for the entire west Coast of his company's nursing homes and assisted living. He gave me his card when he got off of the plane. His name was Todd Fletcher, and he was the VP of Life Care Centers of America. Little did he know in the next month that his facility in Kirkland, Washington, was going to blow up as the epicenter of COVID 19 breaking out in the United States. And so, we retained a cordial relationship in that email. He agreed to be interviewed for our book, and his story is very compelling is one of the chapters in the book. Part of that whole story was my former church, North Shore Community Church in Kirkland, Washington, that adopted the life care center of America of Kirkland to bring them meals for six weeks. They provided lunch and dinner meals to support that staff through the crisis. So, there was kind of a three-way bonding that took place with myself and Mr. Fletcher and one of the pastors at the North Shore Church as this whole thing unraveled. But I think another story that actually Leona might want to share is the restaurant story. I'm thinking of the Canlis. It's fascinating how they got through this from a business perspective here in Seattle.

Leona Bergstrom [00:24:25] Well, we so cleverly divided our book in three sections, disorder, reorder, and order, which is nothing new, but in one of the disorders, we talked about diversifying, the importance of diversifying. And we use the story of the restaurant here in Seattle called Canlis. It's arguably the nicest restaurant in Seattle. It certainly has the most family history. And the owner of that restaurant is a good friend of our son. So, we kind of follow what they're doing. Well, here they are, a fine dining restaurant, has to close down, of course, during the pandemic, as all restaurants did. And they wanted to figure out, okay, Seattle doesn't need fine dining right now. What does Seattle need? And they just dreamed up all kinds of things that they would do. Outdoor burger shacks. This is a fine dining place. They built a tiki shack in the back for a few weeks. But the most interesting was they developed a Canlis community college, they called it, and they just created classes on everything in Seattle, whether it was cooking. What did they do?

Appetizers for something and wine tasting and all these things from Seattle. But what was interesting is the creativity with which they diversified, and they kept changing what they did in order to serve Seattle. They served charities at the same time. And what it taught us is, hey, be creative through this whole thing. Don't be stuck in what we have always done. And so, we tried to use that story to encourage individuals as well as churches and institutions to, okay, we can't do things the same old way we've always done it. But there are creative ways. And yeah, pivot got way overused as a word, but we use the word diversify so that it would fall in with the D words, to be creative and think out of the box. And so that's kind of one of our fun stories of Mark and Brian Canlis, the Canlis restaurant.

Don Payne [00:26:32] Well, that I think, is one of the greatest gifts that perhaps your work is giving to those in the retirement era, is to continue to be generative and creative, that this is not a time for being stuck or thinking about the same old things in the same old ways, which may, this just perhaps is a little bit of stereotyping, but that may be an easy default for many of us in those later years of life, just to kind of get stuck in the same ways of thinking about the same things. And creativity may become more and more difficult. And yet at the same time, the most important thing we could do.

Richard Bergstrom [00:27:11] I just saw a Facebook posting this week from a woman who's pointing out that this educational institution some years back failed to adapt to the way things were going with technology and online learning and has basically, as an institution. I know that Denver Seminary has been very aggressive in trying to reinvent itself in this era. And so, creativity and flexibility and adapting has been important for churches as well. And many of the stories that we captured were of churches trying to survive during this time. I know it's been a tough time for pastors and for churches getting through and now coming out of the pandemic. It was a time of division in that. But one of the stories was just about the same church, North Shore, that had launched a streaming service in the fall of 2019 as their next church plan. So, when COVID hit, they were way ahead of the ballgame in terms of adapting to the new realities. And so, they were able to actually be a teaching church, helping other churches get up to speed with how to deliver their message during COVID.

Leona Bergstrom [00:28:29] You throw in the fact that God is in this whole picture and that He's the Creator and he's created within each of us all the things he's designed us to be and a calling, and you've got a pretty dynamic formula there.

Don Payne [00:28:45] Yeah. Creativity never goes out of fashion. Creativity never ages out, does it?

Leona Bergstrom [00:28:50] That's right.

Don Payne [00:28:52] Well, I'm so grateful for the opportunity to get to know the two of you a little better and to have our listeners hear more about what you're doing and what you've made available. Your website is Re-Ignite.net. And what kinds of resources can people find there?

Richard Bergstrom [00:29:15] We have resources for learning, growing, and engaging in our message in our ministry. And our whole purpose is to help people find and renew and reignite their purpose in life and calling, especially in this particular and unique stage that we call, some call the third third, that we have written about and just want to really encourage our peers to stay in the game and continue to give back. The word for that technically is generativity. Giving back.

Don Payne [00:29:46] Yeah. Good word. Thanks to both of you for taking some time with us and for all the work that you've done and continue to do. I'm excited about that and want to commend your work and your resources to our listeners and hope they can take advantage of that and learn, continue to grow, and get some fresh ideas for their own lives and for the lives of those they serve. Richard and Leona Bergstrom, thank you so much.

Leona Bergstrom [00:30:11] Thank you.

Richard Bergstrom [00:30:12] Thank you.

Don Payne [00:30:12] Yeah, a pleasure to spend some time with you. Friends, this has been engage360 from Denver Seminary. I want to encourage you again to visit our website which is Denver Seminary.edu or contact us if you'd like it podcast@Denver Seminary.edu. That's our email address. Please leave us a rating a review if you get a chance to do that, if any of these interviews have been meaningful or helpful to you, and recommend us to a friend, we would love that. Thanks to all of you who support us, who pray for us, who recommend students here, and to all of you who are students or alums, Richard, yourself included. Thanks for having invested part of your life here with us at Denver Seminary. And we hope that Lord blesses and encourages you very, very richly and all that you continue to do. Bergstroms, thanks to you. Thanks to all of you listeners, and we'll look forward to another conversation with you very soon. Take care.