

Engage360 Episode 114 | Six Questions People Are Asking the Church; Dr. Halee Gray Scott

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 Hi friends. Welcome again to Engage360 at Denver Seminary. We're glad you've chosen to spend a little bit of time with us. My name is Don Payne, your host, and we're looking forward to another interesting conversation today. Let me ask you first this question. What will the church be like with the generations that will populate it or perhaps not in the coming years? This conversation point keeps coming up again and again with church leaders and with those who study religious trends. Demographers, other social scientists have kept themselves really busy over the last few years studying the generations, particularly the younger generations, and their religious beliefs and spiritual inclinations, their understanding of spirituality, the ways they pursue it, their attitudes and expectations toward God and toward the church. Well, the overall results we receive from lots of publications and research centers can be pretty depressing on the whole. However, that is not the whole story. And our guest today is going to offer a bigger, more hopeful picture. Still very realistic. Here's the back story. A few years ago, Denver Seminary was awarded a grant from the Lilly Endowment to study these trends. We called it the Kaleo Project. And when that grant ended, we were awarded a follow up grant that we called the Young Adult Initiative 2.0 to help distribute the results of the first study for the benefit of the seminary and the church at large. Now, both of these research grants have been directed by Dr. Halee Gray Scott, who is a theologian, an experienced author, and an increasingly respected voice in these matters. This is actually her second appearance on Engage360. So, Halee, welcome back.

Halee Gray Scott Thanks for having me back.

Don Payne It's always good to have a conversation with you. Halee has a very recent book out. It's not her only book, but her most recent is called Not a Hopeless Case. It is a Zondervan publication from this year, 2023. Now, Halee describes herself as a former none who is passionate about learning how to reach those who are like she once was in spiritual darkness. Maybe first you could give us a brief review or an overview of some of your key findings from that first grant.

Halee Gray Scott All right. Sure. Over a course of five years, we ended up conducting over 500 interviews with young adult and young adult leaders, 100 focus groups, and that resulted in more than 10,000 pages of data that I went through and started to, you know, whenever you have this qualitative data, interviews, and things like that, you start to hear the same thing over and over again. And what that becomes is it becomes a matter of listening to the key themes. Those things became the key themes. And what we found were six key questions that young adults are asking the church right now. The first is, am I alone and unloved? A lot of young adults, they are feeling the impact of loneliness. There are many, many, many what we call quantitative studies. And just as a side note, the difference between a quantitative study is someone will send out a survey and a person will fill out that survey and send it back. A qualitative data is where you sit with individuals, and you conduct face to face interviews. You analyze body language, you're able to follow up on anything that may be happening in there in your discussion. And you're better able to identify story, you're better able to get more quality information. Well, I would say that you're better able to dive deeper into the story that quantitative surveys might tell you.

Don Payne Yeah, because they're only going to generate numbers or brief answers.

Halee Gray Scott Right. And so, you don't really know what the answer is behind that. And we know that some of these are not always reliable because people tend to, especially Christians, tend to answer aspirationally, meaning they answer their questions in ways that they wish they were rather than what they actually are. So, like, if you're doing the MMPI, which is the Minnesota inventory of personality, Christians have scored high on deception, and that is because they're answering like, I want to be. I want to be like Jesus. I want to be like that, rather than actually answering who they are. And so, it can be kind of tricky.

And that's why, more and more, people are relying on qualitative information with interviews, observations. And that's where this is drawn from.

Don Payne Yeah, I want to come back to that in a moment but keep going. Yeah. These questions, these key questions.

Halee Gray Scott So question number one, am I alone and loved? Loneliness is on the rise. People are not feeling connected. Despite the rise in social media, people are feeling more lonely than ever. Question number two is, am I broken beyond repair? There are so many young adults that are struggling with anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder. Maybe they're struggling with previous sexual assault instances. They are struggling with suicidal ideation or addiction, and they feel broken.

Don Payne Yeah, that that beyond repair piece is really arresting.

Halee Gray Scott It is. And it's can I be fixed, or can I not be fixed? And there is this sentiment among young adults that I can't be fixed. And so that is perhaps one of the guiding emotions behind the rising numbers of suicides that we have today. Am I broken beyond repair? And just the desperation and the hopelessness that entails, that comes with that question. The third question is where do I belong? So one of the reasons young adults have sort of pivoted away from the church is because the way that we've structured our classes for so long is, okay, we can go and do children's ministry through sixth grade, then we have junior high, then we have high school, and then a lot of young adults expressed, well, then we're just kind of thrown out there into life and there's nothing for us. We might have a college ministry, but it's really not the same cohesive group that we had in the beginning. And then once we get done with college, we may not be married. Demographics have changed. People used to get married earlier and now I believe the last time I checked that age has moved to about 27. So, you have about a good five-year period where people are not, you know, they're not married, they don't have kids. And so, they have a hard time fitting into a church because the church instantly goes from if they do have a college ministry, they go directly to some kind of married class.

Don Payne Even those with active singles ministries? Does that not factor in somewhere?

Halee Gray Scott the singles ministry, the way people have responded to singles ministry. And it sounds like, when I describe how people have answered, it sounds like they're being extremely picky. But I don't get that impression when I'm talking to them. But they say with singles ministry, it feels more like they're going on eHarmony or something.

Don Payne Or like going to a singles bar or something.

Halee Gray Scott Yes. So, they're just going to find a husband. So that's what the singles group ends up feeling like. And they feel like their singleness is not what needs to be addressed. They need something that is more comprehensive. Like they should not be reduced to their singleness. And when they are reduced to singles or if it's called the singles class, then it feels like the dating game.

Don Payne Then it's a pickup bar.

Halee Gray Scott Right. Which makes them very uncomfortable, because they're not necessarily looking for that. They're looking for some way to connect spiritually because they know that there's something missing in their life, but they don't exactly know where to find it. So that is the question three. Question four is, can I trust Christian leaders? And this one is really difficult because throughout the duration of our study, we not only dealt with immorality among pastors in the churches that we worked with, but also this was conducted during the MeToo years or just immediately following the MeToo years. And the church too years. And there were still investigations going on. So, they feel like, or at least the people that I spoke with, I don't want to generalize to everybody, but they look at the leaders that we have on the political stage. They look at the leaders that we have in our communities, and then they're trying to find a strong leader

that's trustworthy and a leader that they can rely on. And so, when they see the failures of Christian leaders, it is really discouraging. And I would say that most of the pastors didn't have these problems, but the ones who do cast a long shadow over everyone else.

Don Payne Yeah, they have a sort of disproportionate effect on other people because of the profile and maybe other reasons as well. But I would imagine that one of the points of misgiving from young adults is not only that they're looking for or trying to find leaders who are trustworthy, but they're probably wondering, how would I know whether somebody is trustworthy if they're not, you know, closely accessible to me, if I don't know their lives? How would I know? How am I supposed to trust somebody?

Halee Gray Scott That's true, especially in larger churches.

Don Payne Where the relational distances is greater.

Halee Gray Scott Yes. And there's more people in between you and the person that's actually maybe on stage teaching you. So that is the problem that they really struggle with and that they really bring up, is how are we to trust what they say if their life is not in accordance with what they say? There is a song that used to mean a lot to me when I was coming back to the church, it's by Grover Levy and what a name, but he says, your life is speaking so loud, I can't hear a word you say. And that has always been very powerful for me as I've thought about, you know, the behavior of Christian leaders. And one of the reasons why I think that the adjustments we need to make is considering character over charisma. It's easy to pick a leader, and reasonable even in some ways to pick a leader who can engage, who tells good stories, who just has this magnetism that draws people, and you want to listen to them, and you want to believe them. And yet we have not evaluated their character or their relationship with Christ.

Don Payne And in some ways, that's a difficult thing to evaluate if you don't know a person personally.

Halee Gray Scott Right. Which is, you know, the trouble with some of the elder, you know, when you're bringing on a new pastor, how do you know the character of that person until you've spent a good deal of time with them.

Don Payne Right.

Halee Gray Scott So that's problematic. And question five is, can I ask hard questions? I heard this from people who had been in church for a while. I heard this from at Atheists and Agnostics. The atheist and agnostics focus group that I ran said that one of the reasons they walked away from the church is because they felt like even if they asked a difficult question, they were in some way ostracized, and then people who were in church or trying to get back to church because they felt that need to connect with spirituality. They wanted to ask the difficult questions but didn't know how those questions would be received.

Don Payne So this may be difficult to answer, I don't know. But I wonder whether that is more of a perception than a reality in many cases, because even the way you've described it, people sense that they can't ask difficult questions. I wonder, did you pick up on any indicators or any evidence that people actually were asking hard questions and then were being, you know, actually ostracized or shut down? Or were they just assuming, for the most part that this wouldn't be safe to do?

Halee Gray Scott I think it's both. I think that with some of the atheists and agnostics that I spoke with, they were ostracized from their communities for asking hard questions, like, if you don't accept our doctrine, then you're not going to be part of our community. And so, they ended up leaving the Christian faith altogether. With other people, I think that it is more of a perception.

Don Payne Yeah, it makes me wonder how often they actually tried that.

Halee Gray Scott Well, I did run a panel, and I had an audience of 50 pastors, and I had six young adults up on the panel, and they started talking about hard questions and saying, we can't ask hard questions. And I let them go on for 15 minutes on purpose. And then I said, do you realize that you've sat here for 15 minutes saying I want to ask hard questions and I'm angry that we can't ask hard questions at church. And I said, and you've not named a single hard question, a single topic that you're talking about. And I said, why is that? And they said, we're just scared to say anything. You know, we're just scared.

Don Payne Where does that fear come from? Do you know?

Halee Gray Scott I'm not sure. Maybe it's just a reputation that the church has. And I think that's part of the stereotypes that we have to face as Christians that we have to overcome. Because people have in their minds that we may not be as open or that we may be more dogmatic than we actually are, that we may not, and I don't like this word, but we don't provide safe spaces for them to ask their questions. So, we have that reputation preceding us that we may need to make extra effort to overcome.

Don Payne Yeah, okay. What were the other questions? I think you had a few more there that you had uncovered.

Halee Gray Scott Yeah. And then the final question that they were actually verbalizing to the church is how are they making a difference? And the way that I often brought this to pastors is I would say if your church closed down tomorrow, would your neighborhood notice? And if so, why? And if not, why not? We had a church, West Side Internationale, that was a church plant right from the very beginning of the project. And they had inherited a church from the Methodist church. And rather than the Methodist church, I applaud the Methodist church for doing this, but rather than selling the land for a great profit here in the Denver area, they gave this property to this new start up church. And when from the very beginning, when they started, you know, building their church, they reached out to neighbors, they went out into the neighborhood and said, hey, we're here. If you need something, you can come and get something. They offered holiday meals. It was in a poor neighborhood. They were really trying to make an active difference in their community in a variety of ways. And they still do that today.

Don Payne So that's a key question that young adults are asking, about making a difference. Is it about the church making a difference? Or about whether they can make a difference personally. How is that question being framed?

Halee Gray Scott Well, they're asking that of the church. They don't want to be part of a church where you just go and you sit and you listen to a sermon, and then you leave. Because as some young adults have said to me, oh, well, I could just get that on the podcast. They want to be part of a church that will help them make a difference, because that is the unspoken question that, it's sort of my intuition, no one actually verbalized this, but I saw it in their faces and I saw it underlying their questions, is how can I make a difference? Because they're constantly bombarded with the news. It's happening every day. And of course, news loves to publish what's negative happening. And that can be overwhelming for young adults. And so, when you are in a position where there is so much going on, it gets to be the feeling where you're like, if I can't do something, then I won't do anything. And that leads to a feeling of helplessness and despair. And I think they want to know how they can make a difference. And I think that the church has an opportunity to teach them how to do that.

Don Payne That's really interesting, Halee, because churches, I think, for a long time have emphasized getting involved and making a difference. But maybe, and I'm thinking out loud here, but maybe the ways in which churches have done that have not gone as far as would be really helpful. So, for example, to speak rather globally or broadly about making a difference is one thing that can be inspirational, aspirational, but it doesn't always help us know in a more concrete, immediate sense what steps can I take, what can I do in my immediate vicinity, my neighborhood, with my life and my gifts?

Halee Gray Scott Exactly. And I think this is where discipleship comes to be of extreme importance, because young adults, even though they want to make a difference, even though they desire to make a difference, they don't exactly know how to do that. They've not been discipled in the way of service. And I think that the church can come alongside and help young adults learn how to connect their giftedness with the needs of the world in better ways. I've spoken with people in England who are doing that very thing. They're helping young adults analyze their own lives. Young adults will come to them with this sense of emptiness and unfulfillment and say, I want to do something with my life. I want to do something to help the world. I want to make a difference. But I'm not exactly sure how to do it. And so, what they do is they help that person get from that point to the point where they're using their giftedness to make that difference.

Don Payne Okay. Yeah, you're making me think of the word cruciform in the pattern of Christ and suffering and taking up one's cross. There is a distinctively gospel oriented or Christian way of thinking about serving that would not necessarily be shared by everybody, right?

Halee Gray Scott Correct.

Don Payne Yeah. So service is not service is not service.

Halee Gray Scott Right.

Don Payne So the gospel does shape the ways in which we try to answer some of these questions or help young adults answer these questions. I think that's a really important continued exploration that we all need to lean into.

Halee Gray Scott Yeah. These questions are absolutely answerable by the church. And many of the churches that we worked with stepped up to the plate. For example, am I broken beyond repair? There was one church that brought in mental health groups where young adults could join these small groups to, whether or not they were struggling with anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, they were within the walls of the church, welcomed within the walls of the church, and they were put into small groups with people their own age to discuss this in support groups. So, they weren't just shipped off or referred to a counselor, because the way young adults describe it is that feels like the church is just pushing them off. It might make them feel like, oh, I'm not help-able. No one can help me. You know, I'm beyond the help of the church when that's actually totally not the case. There were so many churches that rose to the occasion and were able to meet and answer these questions.

Don Payne Now, you call your book not a hopeless case, which implicitly suggests that this is a bit of a push back against broader currents of thought that are suggesting more hopelessness.

Halee Gray Scott Right.

Don Payne What are you finding? What have you found in your research with young adults that is giving more hope than many other studies would suggest there is?

Halee Gray Scott Well, that's one of my most passionate points, and it's passionate for me, because I have sat across from pastors with tears in their eyes and they have read those research reports saying nobody's coming back to church. There is the rising of the nones. Only 30% of the people are going to come back to your church after the pandemic. And they're weeping and they have put their lives into the gospel. They have put their lives into what they believe to be their calling. And they get that negative report and report after report after report. And you could pull up reports almost from every single day of new studies of the nones. And that overwhelming bad news is so disheartening. But it's not a hopeless case. And I'll give you an example. When I first started this study, I was sitting with a pastor, and I was wanting this church to be part of the study because they fit within a certain demographic and because I really wanted them to be part of it. And the pastor said, there are no young adults here in this neighborhood. Why should I be part of this project if there are no young adults here, and if there are young adults here, they're not going to stay

here because they can't afford to stay here. So why should I invest in them? And I was kind of taken aback by his perspective, but I just moved forward and was able to convince him to come on board. And at the end of the study, I conducted more than 20 focus groups with all of the different churches. And at that church, you're supposed to have 14 people max at a focus group. I went to the young adult group to conduct a focus group with that church, and there were over 50 young adults in that group.

Don Payne Oh, that's great.

Halee Gray Scott the group that the pastor said, there are no young adults here, there were 50 of them. And they were bright, and they were smart, and they had good questions and good feedback. And I almost weep thinking about it now. I mean, I was almost on the verge of tears then because I was just like, wow. 50 people here.

Don Payne So they're there.

Halee Gray Scott They're there. They are not a hopeless case.

Don Payne Halee, thanks.

Halee Gray Scott Thank you.

Don Payne Thanks for spending time with us. And for all the work, the years of work you've done and are still in the process of doing with the second grant. So, congratulations on the book. Dr. Halee Gray Scott. I want to commend her book to you again, not a hopeless case by Zondervan, so get yourself a copy of that, especially if you are thinking about how you and your church can better minister to those who might otherwise be marked by a lot of hopelessness or think that they're hopeless. They're not a hopeless case. We're glad that you've chosen to spend some time with us. And as always, we'd love to hear from you. You can contact us at our email address, which is podcast@DenverSeminary.edu. And as I regularly invite you, I will continue to ask you to visit our website DenverSeminary.edu, where you will find not only a lot of information about our various degree programs, some of which are our newly revised and rebooted, but also just other resources that can benefit you whether you're a student or not. Thank you for your interest in Denver Seminary, for your prayers, for your support of whatever type that is, whether you're a student or an alum, board member, or someone who prays for us or has heard about us. We're grateful for that and hope that we can be of service to you in whatever God has given you to do. One final note, you can always find full written transcripts of our podcast interviews on our website. You go to the website DenverSeminary.edu and just do a search for Engage360. That's all one word with no spaces. You can click on any episode and download a full written transcript. If you want to go back to some conversation and follow up on that. Until we have another chance to be with you, hope the Lord blesses you and keeps you. Take care, friends.