

Engage360 | Episode 12: Homelessness and the Denver Rescue Mission

Introduction: 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.

Dr. Don Payne: Hi, I'm your host Don Payne. When my oldest son was in college a few years back, he had a decent job, but at one point he was between leases on apartments and he decided that he would simply be homeless for a summer. So he kept a sleeping bag in his car and he slept on the lawn of his office building most nights and he experienced the local police coming by to move him along because he wasn't allowed to sleep there. And he probably got a very light dose of some other experiences that are common to homeless persons. Now I have to admit, and I think he would as well, that he did not do this out of any deep moral sensibilities. I frankly, I think he thought it would make for some good stories, which it did, not least when he would show up for work and shower at the office after sleeping somewhere in the parking lot. And now of course, the reality of homelessness is a far more sobering matter than that. There was a time years ago when for many Americans, homelessness was an abstraction. It was mostly a statistic. And now even in some of the most comfortable and affluent American suburbs, people without homes can be seen and even encountered, any and every day of the week. Now, it's almost impossible to think about people who are homeless apart from homelessness as a social economic, political phenomenon. And many in that life situation would never have imagined that life could have taken that direction for them. I suppose there are many in that situation for reasons so complex that they defy in East simplistic moral analysis, homeless persons and their life situations can bring out some of the most visceral and complex emotions for those who have predictable and adequate living conditions. So the gospel, this redemptive invasion of human life and history by Jesus Christ, it compels engagement of those often known as the last, the lost, the least, and the little. And at the same time, it seems pretty common that followers of Jesus can struggle with ambivalence between that gospel imperative and the desire for ROI, return on investment. The desire to see difference made. Actually just this morning I was reading in Jeremiah chapter 22, and through the prophet, the Lord compared the wayward king shall loom with his father, King Josiah, verse 16, says he that has Josiah defended the cause of the poor and needy and so all went well. And is that not what it means to know me, declares the Lord. So for those who want to engage the world with the redemptive power of the gospel, that sort of heightens the tension, and heightens the stakes. And we need a lot of guidance from wise, from experienced, from courageous people like, our guest this week, Brad Meuli originally hails from Kansas and after serving in the Marine Corps, he had a 17 year career in banking and was first a board member for the Denver Rescue Mission than a staff member commissioned. And now Brad serves as the

President and CEO of the Denver Rescue Mission. So Brad, welcome to Engage360.

Brad Meuli: It's so great to be here Don. Thank you for asking me.

Dr. Don Payne: How long have you been the CEO, the director of the mission?

Brad Meuli: On April Fool's Day, it was 20 years.

Dr. Don Payne: Is that, is that suggestive of something?

Brad Meuli: I don't know. It's always kept me humble to remember that I came on April Fool's Day, but 20 years, 20 years, which is pretty incredible.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, that's a good stretch. I forgot to mention also that Brad is the chair of the board of trustees at Denver Seminary. So, I'll just take this little interlude to say thanks for your leadership of the Seminary board and for all that you invest there. That's appreciated.

Brad Meuli: Listen, I appreciate you saying that. It's a great honor, to have that opportunity. And so I'm in my second year of being chairman and, it's been a great honor. I love what Denver Seminary does, and so it's been wonderful.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. So I saw on the Denver Rescue Mission's website that at one point you are, I guess at several points, you have rode your bicycle across Kansas and from Denver to Phoenix and from Reno to Seattle to raise money for the Denver Rescue Mission, which makes me realize that yes, indeed you were a banker because you have figured out how to monetize your habits, your hobbies, right. For a good cause though.

Brad Meuli: That is true. And I didn't go alone. You know, we had a team of folks that did it together. We were, and we were well supported. We actually stayed in not four star hotels, but we stayed at some hotels. I'm getting a little too old to sleep on the ground, you know.

Dr. Don Payne: I get that.

Brad Meuli: Yeah. So, but it's very, very challenging. And I really, one of the things that was so wonderful is the outpouring of financial support, you know, to help fight hunger at the Denver Rescue Mission. But at the same time, you know, I think about the guys in our addiction program, we call it the New Life Program. And what they have to go through. And I thought, if I can just go through this for 10 days, you know, if they can go through something for 13 months trying to overcome drug and alcohol addiction, surely I can go through something for 10 days for them.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Yeah. Good call, man. That has a long way to go. Any one of those, I can't even fathom.

Brad Meuli: Yeah. The Phoenix to Denver was hard because a lot of desert, you know, I will say the going across the Northwest, Northern California up through Oregon into Washington, rained on us every single day. But it was beautiful. It was incredibly beautiful. And that part of the country is really, really more encouraging to cyclists and, than some of the other places that I've gone.

Dr. Don Payne: More trails, better roads.

Brad Meuli: Yeah. Well, and just people are more cognizant of riders, I thought, which was a wonderful thing because they're out there. And so, when you're going across and when you're in Kayenta, Arizona, there's not as many riders.

Dr. Don Payne: Huh. Imagine that.

Brad Meuli: And of course across Kansas is just flat. When we went with a bike across Kansas, which was kind of fun. So, it a little shorter but a pretty flat.

Dr. Don Payne: Well [inaudible] doing that. Okay. So the Denver Rescue Mission, I found out on some website, so this has got to be true because I found it on the internet.

Brad Meuli: Okay. There you go.

Dr. Don Payne: Denver Rescue Mission is ranked as one of the top 10 rescue missions in the US, now again, I don't know who, I don't remember who did those rankings, but again, it was on the internet. So it's got to be true.

Brad Meuli: I wonder if, I wonder if I did.

Dr. Don Payne: Know that may or may not be the case.

Brad Meuli: No, that's very kind to whoever wrote this.

Dr. Don Payne: I don't know what metrics they use for that, but it was impressive to me. And I have in all seriousness heard before that the Denver Rescue Mission is considered among the Vanguard among the leaders, the pace setters for rescue mission ministry across the US, and what I do know also is that the Denver Rescue Mission has a very diverse operation, in a multifaceted operation. Tell us a bit about that. What, what are the various things that the rescue mission does in addition to the main location in LoDo?

Brad Meuli: Sure. Well, first of all, it's very kind that someone would rank us that way. We are one of the larger missions in the country simply because, you have to go about another three, 600 miles to find another large mission when you're coming West. And so people often stop in Colorado and our economy has been

so good that people have come and really stopped to be with us. The Denver Rescue Mission has nine facilities and we basically do four things very quickly. One is emergency services, the 900,000 meals, the 400,000 nights of shelter annually is just keeping people alive. Secondly, we have a New Life Rehabilitation Program and these are guys struggling with drug and alcohol issues. They stay with us for about 13 months. We have 200 men in that particular program. We do transitional housing for families, in a couple of different ways. And then lastly, we have outreach into the community, which is food boxes, clothing, furniture, that sort of thing. And so, it's wider than that, but there's kind of in those four categories.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. Now you have the farm. Right up by Wellington.

Brad Meuli: Yes. We do, we have a farm in Wellington. We also operate the Fort Collins Rescue Mission.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. I didn't know that. Okay. Now the farm is, I understand is a place where some, some folks who are in a certain phase, correct me if I'm wrong, during a certain phase of some of the programs actually work there. And then you grow food that is actually then used at the mission. Do I have that right?

Brad Meuli: We do. We do grow food that is used at the mission, but the New Life Program is at the farm in, here's what it's really, really where it's really been good is there are folks that are struggling with drug and alcohol addictions and they don't want to come to Denver. They don't want to be in the big city because they're in rural communities. And alcohol and drug addiction are not just something that happens in the city and happens in rural communities. So we draw from Western Kansas. We draw from all over Colorado. That's from more rural from Southern Wyoming, actually from even a farther group than that. We have 72 men in our New Life Rehabilitation Program, so they're not in any one particular phase and sent up there. They are actually, start from the very beginning. And so, and then, and we have cows and pigs and all that sort of thing.

Dr. Don Payne: So the real deal farm?

Brad Meuli: It's a real farm experience.

Dr. Don Payne: I think that's therapeutic in its own right.

Brad Meuli: I think it really is. It's, and it's beautiful up there, particularly in the summer. Now it gets a little windy and cold in the winter time, but, it's great to be outside and a lot of lot of folks really enjoy that.

Dr. Don Payne: Brad, I found a stat from the National Alliance to End Homelessness. They report, I think as of 2018, 10,857 homeless persons in Colorado now that, I don't know if you want or you want to correct that figure at all, but it just as a starting

point, what either that or what are their stats would help us understand and interpret what's at issue, what's going on with homelessness?

Brad Meuli: Sure. Well, I think that's probably a pretty good number. It's hard to count folks. You know, it's really hard to count. The city does a thing, they call the point in time survey. And they do it every year in January. We're involved with that. Then some of the numbers just came out and there's a little over 5,000 in the Metro Denver area, so over half of those people are here in Denver. But again, hard to count people, some of the schools would say there's a lot more folks that are homeless because people maybe are on a couch or they're with another family member or something like that, but they are effectively homeless. Those people really don't get counted the same way. And so.

Dr. Don Payne: There could be far more.

Brad Meuli: I believe there is far more. I really do.

Dr. Don Payne: What is, what is the average person, if there is such a thing, need to know about homelessness that they might not know otherwise?

Brad Meuli: Sure. I think a couple things. One is, the people who are experiencing homelessness are real people. They're just like you and me. There's so many different reasons for people being homeless. I mean, it could be a medical event that caused it, it could be a domestic violence. It could be a family thing, that happens. Yes, it could be drugs and alcohol. The number one reason for being homeless is obviously it's just loss of a home and one of the.

Dr. Don Payne: That can't be replaced or?

Brad Meuli: Yeah. Well one of the reasons that that's happening is that the cost of rents has just gone up so much or the cost of even owning a home has really gone up because this has been a great economy. And consequently there's been a shortage of enough housing, particularly affordable housing. Which has caused people to be in that situation. So first of all, they're real people, people just like you and me. And then really, the second thing I say is that people who are panhandling that you see on the street corner really are not reflective of the people on the street. And the reason that I say that is 40% of the people are experiencing homelessness are families. And so when you see you're kind of the old image of a guy standing on the street, a veteran, you know, maybe 60 years old or something. I'm sorry. That's just not what we're experiencing when we're working with homeless people.

Dr. Don Payne: So those are two different phenomenon.

Brad Meuli: Yeah.

Dr. Don Payne: Typical homelessness and folks on the street corners.

Brad Meuli: Yeah. I'm just, not all people on the street corners are homeless, so it'll be a good thing to remember it and don't just look at that and go, okay, that guy doesn't want to work. Or he, you know. And that's what we tend to think of when we see someone standing on a street corner. There's a lot of, lot of homeless folks that aren't standing on a street corner. They're inside our facility trying to get help.

Dr. Don Payne: I see. Okay. Rescue missions, as far as I'm acquainted with them, have been around for a long time.

Brad Meuli: They really have, I mean, the Denver Rescue Mission has been around for 127 years.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. Okay. What's the oldest one that you know of in this country?

Brad Meuli: Oh, in this, well, I was going to say Glasgow, Scotland. And I think it was one of the first ones and really the, it came out of the whole Salvation Army and Mr. Booth, you know, doing those. And so I think the oldest one is in New York. I think it's the Bowery Rescue Mission in New York City. So yes, they've been around for a very, very long time. And it's my, you might find it interesting to know that the Denver Rescue Mission really started out as two women at Galilee Baptist Church who started taking prostitutes into their home. So we start from very, very humble beginnings and I think most rescue missions really kind of started that way. The ones that have been around a long time, with a Christian community at church, churches saying, Hey, we want to help, you know, what can we do?

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. Well as long as rescue mission ministry has been around, how has that type of ministry changed or shifted or grown over the decades? If it has?

Brad Meuli: Oh wow. It's really changed. You know, just in the, in the 20 years I've been at the Denver Rescue Mission, it's really, really changed. There's a lot of reasons for that change, but I think initially they were just soup kitchens and definitely during the Depression and World War II, that sort of thing, they were really just soup kitchens. But I think they've become so much more than that. Yes, it's important to get people inside and, once they've had something to eat and they have a place to stay, then they can begin to think about how can I get out of this situation and we can come alongside of them, build relationships. I think this is what Christ is really encouraging us to do is to come alongside of folks, build relationships and say, how can we help you to get out of this? Our mission at the Denver Rescue Mission is changing lives in the name of Christ. I mean, we can't do that. Christ has to and then we're trying to meet people at their physical and spiritual points of need and help them become productive, self-sufficient citizens again. Our goal is not to just keep feeding the same person year after year after year, although we will. It's to build a relationship with that person and then say, Hey, how can I help you to move out of homelessness? It might be they need to go to state street medical clinic too because they have mental health issues. It might be, they might be a housing first candidate,

maybe they need to be in our rehabilitation program. There's a lot of different ways to try to guide people out of homelessness. And that's what we're really trying to do. And I think that's what rescue missions are doing much more today than they were when they were just soup kitchens.

Dr. Don Payne: Okay. That makes sense. So what's the, what's the most difficult part of all this?

Brad Meuli: Well, the most, the most difficult thing for us, for our chaplains is when you have someone in our rehabilitation program that has done well and has been off drugs and alcohol for six months or so, or maybe even longer. And then they relapse and they. Yeah. And that, that is so hard. You pour your life into someone and you think they're getting it. And then, and here's the, here's the reality, Don, addiction is a horrible, horrible thing. Addiction will, is more important than family. You know, it's more important than material things. It's more important than marriages. I mean, it's just, to an addict. And so it's really, really difficult. And so if, and so that's why folks need Jesus. This is why Jesus is so important. We have men in our New Life Rehabilitation Program right now that had been in multiple programs, but by the time they get to the Denver Rescue Mission, they're just ready for anything. And here's what they'll say to me: The difference Brad, is I've come to know God here. I know Jesus and Jesus is, has become more important to me, than my addiction. And so this has really been the key in seeing people's lives changed.

Dr. Don Payne: Tell us a story or two that really captures what keeps you doing this.

Brad Meuli: Sure. Okay. So I love to tell this story. We do a graduation twice a year. And so I'd been at the mission for five years at the time there was, and so I'm sitting up in our chapel and a young man by the name of Robert who's graduating from our New Life Rehabilitation Program is sitting right next to me, turns to me, and he says, Brad, would you like to meet my mom? And I said, yeah, Robert, I'd love to meet your mom. Well, I knew he'd been estranged from his mom and he had done horrible things, stolen money, all that sort of thing. But his sister had brought his mom to the graduation and he hadn't talked to his mom. He's been with us 13 months, hadn't talked to his mom in over a year. And his sister brought the mom to the graduation. So the graduation ends, we start down the stairs and this little woman about 4'11" comes running up and she throws her arms around her son and she says, Robert, I love you. I knew you were going to make it. You're a good boy. And he's crying. She's crying. And I thought, it doesn't get any better than this. And then it got better. When Robert steps back, he can hardly talk. And he said, I want you to meet Brad, who runs the Denver Rescue Mission. And so then she grabs me and she begins to hug me and she's crying on my shoulder or whatever. And she said these words that I'll never forget. Thank you for giving me my son back. And it was in that moment that I knew that this is exactly what we do at the Denver Rescue Mission. We restore sons to their moms, we restore husbands to their wives, we restore families, you know, in the name of Jesus Christ. And this is so great. I got to keep doing this and so, and I have for, 17, 18 more years.

Dr. Don Payne: I think we'll just end the podcast right here, enough said. All right?

Brad Meuli: So that I love to tell that story because it was just impacting me forever.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. What accounts for, this is, I guess, a broader question. What accounts for these differences in the states where homelessness has decreased most significantly versus those where it has not?

Brad Meuli: Yeah. Well, I'm not sure. There's a lot of states where it's decreased significantly. Let me just say that, you know, we belong to an association of rescue missions called City Gate. Used to be the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions. There's about 300 rescue missions all across the country. And I'm not hearing these CEO's say, wow, our homeless numbers are way down.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. That was probably a bad, badly framed question. But, you know, were there. Whatever differences there are in the kind of impact it's.

Brad Meuli: Well, I think the key, I think what you're really asking me, Don, is what, what's the key to effectively getting people off the street? And one of the key things that I think we're doing really well in Denver and we're in now, granted we're still seeing an increase in the number of homeless. Which is, I think more a function of the economy here or the function of the number of people that love to be in Colorado. I mean, certainly we've seen it grow, but I, I think the difference is that we're really working closely together. When I talk to other CEOs, you know, when we talk about business, a business partnership in a city partnership and the faith based community all working closely together, like what we have in Denver, there's a lot of other cities that are not seeing that. They're operating as silos or as in islands. And it makes it very, very difficult. But working together collectively, I think that's been the wonderful thing actually that's happened in Denver over the last few years.

Dr. Don Payne: That's good to hear. I wonder whether, and you can correct this or revise it in any way you want, I wonder whether and to what extent homelessness as a phenomenon has been politicized and, if it has, how has that affected, I mean, are there, they're both good and bad byproducts of that?

Brad Meuli: Yeah, I, so we try to stay out of the political politicization. How do I even say that word?

Dr. Don Payne: That's good enough. That will work.

Brad Meuli: Okay. Thank you so much. We try to stay out of that because I mean, the fact is that we, we are really, the city has the same goal that the Denver Rescue Mission does. And that's to get people out of homelessness. So now there may be some different approaches how to do that, but I think we can join hands and walk together and try to resolve that. I think sometimes this can get a politicized, you know, but again, we really try to stay out of that particular thing.

And I, and I think over the last few years here in Denver, honestly with Mayor Hickenlooper and then you know, and now Mayor Hancock in the city of Denver, there's really been a huge desire to just, how can we work together to solve this? Whether you're a Democrat, whether you're a Republican, it doesn't matter, but what can we do to try to get people back as productive, self-sufficient citizens.

Dr. Don Payne: That's good to hear. You know, you're a Denver Seminary graduate. I'm going to shift this in a little bit more of a personal direction if I can. You're Denver Seminary graduate, how has your Seminary education influenced what you do in this ministry?

Brad Meuli: Yeah, so I've been asked that before. I get the chance to be asked that as a Denver Seminary chairman, which is really kind of a fun thing. And so I have an MA in leadership. And so, which seemed to be a really good, I joined the mission and then started going to class, I like to say I took a two year program and completed it in a whopping seven years. So, but I was able to complete that. And I think the thing that, there's several different things, but one of the things that's been so important is I think that Denver Seminary, first of all, provided me such a great background into the Bible and the issues of the Bible. And my relationship with God grew here at Denver Seminary and my understanding of God, and just how powerful and wonderful the grace of Jesus Christ grew, which is, all those things are very wonderful. But the other thing that happened through my mentoring relationships and I really learned how important relationships are. And I really feel like that's really a key component for the Denver Rescue Mission. As I said, whether it's guys that are in our New Life Program or people coming off the street, we're trying to share Jesus with people by first coming alongside of them and loving them and developing a relationship with them. And so, that's been a great thing that really was cemented at a Denver Seminary.

Dr. Don Payne: What's the, you've already told us a great and gripping story of a transformation there. I think at some point, ministry always has to be fun. There has to be a fun component. You got to be able to laugh. I want to know what, what's the funnest or maybe the funniest thing that's ever happened to you in 20 years leading the rescue mission?

Brad Meuli: Well, there's been some, you know, it's interesting. There's been some tough things that have happened and it's, when you first say that, you know, I think of some of those hard things that have happened. But we've got to do some fun things Don. Honestly. We do a big Thanksgiving Turkey drive every year. And the mission has a Turkey outfit that I've dressed up in more than one or two times. So, one year we did kind of a fun thing that our senior leadership team, to the song "Call Me Maybe." And so I don't know if you remember that one from.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, I don't, but I sing us a few bars, if you would like.

Brad Meuli: I really could not. I really could not. But what we did was we, the song is playing, then we stood behind some of our employees who didn't know that we were there and we danced behind them. And so, and then we showed it at a all staff meeting and we said, we called the video, We're Behind You. And so, it was really kind of fun and to see people's faces when they realized that the CEO and some Vice-Presidents were dancing, really bad dancing I might add, behind them. And so just trying to encourage people and, you know, have some lightness and stuff. But we laugh about stuff that happens everyday.

Dr. Don Payne: You kind of have to, you know. For people who would want to be more involved in, you know, giving God's heart God's care for those who are in homelessness, what a good first steps for them?

Brad Meuli: Sure. Well, first of all, if you'd like to volunteer, you can just go to our website, which is DenverRescueMission.org and we'd love to have you come volunteer. There's a little volunteer button, ask for some information, but you could bring some family members or some friends down or you know, a church group to come help us. We had over 16,000 volunteers come last year. We need every single one of them. So, if you're interested in doing more than that, we have some mentoring programs or we have schools, or groups that do, you know, food drives for us or clothing drives or coat drives, all that sort of thing. And so there's a lot of ways that you can get involved in and obviously we are so appreciative and so reliant on the community for their financial provision. And so if you want to be a donor, we'd love to have you.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, absolutely. What, give us a good read. What's the one best book or best thing people should read to get a better understanding of this broad phenomenon of homelessness?

Brad Meuli: Okay. Not necessarily a Christian book, but I think one that's really goes written for schools. It's called, *Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne. And so I really.

Dr. Don Payne: That was my grandmother's name.

Brad Meuli: Oh, there you go.

Dr. Don Payne: I don't think she wrote the book.

Brad Meuli: But I think, I think that's a terrific book to read. John Ashman has written a book, and John Ashman is the CEO of City Gate. It's called *Invisible Neighbors*. It can be used for a Bible studies or a Sunday school as well. I think that's a really, really a good book. And then, just kind of on an individual basis when this kind of a fun read is Mike Ankowski's *Under the Overpass*. Mike is a kid here in Parker. He's not a kid anymore. I think he has his doctorate and he's teaching somewhere at a seminary. But he experienced life as a homeless person with another friend of his on the streets for about six months. And so, really writes about his experiences and that again, that is called, *Under the Overpass*.

Dr. Don Payne: Brad Meuli, thanks so much. This has been stimulating.

Brad Meuli: Oh, good. Hey, listen, it's been great to be here and I, again, I'm just so thankful for this community that we live in for the, because we're so reliant on this community. And as well, I'm just so thankful for Denver Seminary and its impact on the world.

Dr. Don Payne: Well, and I know this is probably a life-changing moment for you to be in the DNR, the famous, the soon-to-be famous DNR sound booth for the very first time.

Brad Meuli: Yes. It's thrilling.

Dr. Don Payne: It should be all these black walls there are so exciting. So black. Brad Meuli, thanks a lot. This is Engage360 from Denver Seminary, we hope you'll listen to us again. Give us your feedback or questions. Email us at podcast@denverseminary.edu. Thanks for listening. Check in with us again next week.