

Engage360 Episode 127 | Finding Community in Education; Elisa Morgan and Vivian Mabuni

[00:00:00] **Elisa Morgan:** Hello, and welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. I'm your host, Elisa Morgan, speaker, and author, as well as a Denver Seminary Master of Divinity alumna, President Emerita of the MomCo by Mops International, and host of the God Hears Her and Discover the Word podcast for our Daily Bread Ministries. I am looking so forward today to our conversation with Vivian Mabuni. Vivian is the author of the book, *Open Hands, Willing Heart*, the host of the *Someday is Here* podcast, Bible teacher, and widely sought after speaker. She's also a student in the M. A. in Biblical and Theological Studies program at Denver Seminary and a member of the seminary's board of trustees. And guess what? She's my very dear friend as well. So today, Vivian and I are recording the first in a series of podcasts with women from Denver Seminary's Women's Leadership Cohort, an intimate group of women speakers and authors and writers and ministry leaders. All who are attending seminary together. Vivian created this cohort and brought this group of women together. You can learn more denverseminary.edu/wlc. I'm looking forward to learning more about this unique educational experience. So, Vivian, start us off with this. What is a cohort? I don't even know what that word means.

[00:01:46] **Vivian Mabuni:** Well, I don't know the actual formal dictionary definition of a cohort, but my understanding of people in PhD programs in academia, they generally will have a group of students in the same discipline who stick together through the entire program. And my understanding of my friends who have gone on to get PhDs that are part of cohorts, that the camaraderie actually helps the student graduate.

[00:02:16] **Elisa Morgan:** So, it's kind of like a small group for studying together. Seminary stuff.

[00:02:21] **Vivian Mabuni:** Yes. And the idea is really to be in a process together because there's more to school than just showing up for class.

[00:02:31] **Elisa Morgan:** That is so well put. I'm a graduate of Denver Seminary, as I said in our intro, but it's been a million years since I graduated. But I have to say that the experience of attending seminary, and it was all in person back in my day, was truly transformative. I mean really it changes who you are. So, thinking of having a group especially of women, just can I say there were six women in the entire school when I was enrolled at Denver Seminary.

[00:03:01] **Vivian Mabuni:** Elisa Morgan you are a trailblazer.

[00:03:03] **Elisa Morgan:** Well or something, just a weird person. I was, you know, kind of an odd one. And the idea of studying with women like me, I mean, I learned tons from the guys, I don't mean it that way, but to be in a like-minded spot, especially with women who maybe have some of the same callings on their lives, that is super interesting. So, Vivian, help me understand the journey that you went through, that God brought you through in inventing this cohort, this program for Denver Seminary.

[00:03:35] **Vivian Mabuni:** The dream really is building something that I wish I had. So, when I joined staff with Cru 35 years ago, I elected to take graduate level seminary classes, fully intending to finish a seminary degree at some point. And then I met my husband and fell in love and then the kids came along and then I started back in 2008 back into seminary once my youngest was in school full time and was at Talbot off and on for about 10 years. And like you there were times I was the only woman

in the class and there were so many times that I would have to drop out and then I would reapply again and then I would drop out again and just it was life.

It was life. And I would have to say that there was not a lot of relational connection. I did not have that. I would do a combination of hybrid classes where some of it was in person, some of it was online, fully online classes. I just kind of tried to go in person, but I never felt like I was a part of the community.

[00:04:38] **Elisa Morgan:** Wow.

[00:04:39] **Vivian Mabuni:** So, when I joined the board of trustees at Denver Seminary, I just thought I'll go ahead and just transfer to Denver because why not get to know the amazing faculty here at this seminary where I'm so honored to serve. So that was the idea. And then the idea was starting to float around that I've seen other cohorts and women successfully finish their seminary degrees because they're together. So, I started floating some ideas around with some of the leaders here at Denver seminary and they were with me.

[00:05:14] **Elisa Morgan:** That's so cool.

[00:05:15] **Vivian Mabuni:** So, it's been collaborative. I have loved it. We launched the very first fall cohort. So, I've told this group, you are the guinea pigs. We'll work out all the bugs here. But it has been incredible.

[00:05:28] **Elisa Morgan:** And you're a part of the cohort yourself.

[00:05:29] **Vivian Mabuni:** Yes. So, I actually went ahead and took the classes that they are currently taking so that I could warn them ahead of time. Like, this is what's coming down the road, you know, this is Turabian and all the things. And so, I'm kind of just trying to move a little bit ahead of them. So I go to class, but I don't, thankfully I don't have to do all the homework for that class because I have homework for my classes, so.

[00:05:51] **Elisa Morgan:** You know what's interesting too as we're both comparing our seminary journeys. Life is so different today than it was in 19, let's see, 80 or so, when I graduated and back for you when you joined Cru to find in person experiences is a rarity, you know, then add COVID to that, you know, on top of it. It's just the pace of our world, the way we are, you almost need a cohort for any kind of really true learning experience. What are your hopes for this particular cohort, for the women leadership cohort at Denver Seminary?

[00:06:26] **Vivian Mabuni:** When I think about this cohort, I am blown away. God has entrusted these women, and they are humble, they love God so much, but God has given them some real, they have been entrusted with very large platforms. And so, my dream is to see these women continue the good work that God started, but to also have the formal seminary training, which will only serve to supercharge what they already teach and write.

[00:06:58] **Elisa Morgan:** So, they're already on a platform, and some of them may be well known. I'm thinking immediately about the woman who feels called to speak or to write or to be in leadership but hasn't yet been gifted with a platform. Is this kind of a cohort appropriate for her?

[00:07:15] **Vivian Mabuni:** Oh, yes. I envision that we would continue to have these cohorts. And the generosity that these women have with each other is unmatched. So, I do picture that. And what's so interesting about this particular cohort, they were similar to me in several of them starting on their seminary degrees and never completing them. Again, just feeling so lonely out there. So, I do think that because we do the classes online, as well as having twice, we'll have one-week intensives here in Denver that we just can't wait to be together, but there's just the sense that our lives are starting to cut deeply into each other's. There's a beautiful sisterhood that is forming through being able to struggle through life but pray for each other and it's just been so beautiful. It's been so beautiful.

[00:08:07] **Elisa Morgan:** So, there's classes, there's exams, there's reading, there's interaction, but there's also life exchange going on. That is so special.

[00:08:17] **Vivian Mabuni:** Yeah, and I think all of us are at the point right now where the papers are being turned in and the exhaustion is setting in and these women are on airplanes and flying places and speaking at conferences and retreats and so on and so forth. The shared camaraderie of being in the cohort is making it worthwhile. So, for every one of them, we have all wanted to quit seminary because it's just hard sometimes. But being together and being in this community has served to keep us going.

[00:08:52] **Elisa Morgan:** So, people who are listening right now who are already in ministry, and you feel this nudge to kind of, I'm going to use this word, legitimize your offering because, you know, you're more self-taught, this is a kind of a program that would really meet that need, right? And then for the woman who's really feeling called but hasn't yet, quote, arrived at having an audience, is she going to feel weird in such a group, or can Denver Seminary design a program where it's in a place where her life is really lived?

[00:09:22] **Vivian Mabuni:** Yeah. Well, some of the women in the cohort in this particular one are not necessarily called to the stage or to write books and do those kinds of things. And I think it's been through relationships. So, my encouragement is if you have always wanted to go to seminary just for your own benefit of knowing God and his word, this is a great way to just link arms and just grab some friends. I invited my friends, but then there are people I didn't know, and they were invited by other friends. And so, there are a few degrees of separation with most of these relationships, but you know, jumping in the pool together, we're all in it now and we all know each other. And what's wonderful is that as we are sitting in on a class that's taught live every week, we are sent into breakout times to process or discuss a passage. And in that way, we're getting to know each other as well in person from all over the country. And it's really beautiful. It's really beautiful.

[00:10:22] **Elisa Morgan:** I love that. I'm going to dig down here just one more time on this. If you're listening, you don't have to be invited either. I mean, this first cohort was an invitational kind of situation because it's like a pilot, you know, that was just getting going. So, if you're listening, and you think, well, I don't know Vivian and nobody's ever invited me, don't freak out here and don't wait. You just need to go to denverseminary.edu/WLC and you can take the first step because guess what? Here's the truth. Every one of us women can trip over that invitation. myth that we have to be invited, you know, that a woman in leadership is the exception. No, every woman has influence and is therefore invited into leadership because guess what? God invites you into using your influence for his kingdom. So, there's not going to be an invitation in the mailbox because you've already been invited in your heart.

[00:11:17] **Vivian Mabuni:** There you go. And I think, too, we just don't know what's around the bend. And I can't help but think that for some of these women that may not be doing certain things right now, that the degree is going to serve not only how they grow in their relationship with God, but how they interact with people at church and the types of small groups that they will lead. I mean, there are so many ways that women serve. And by having the degree, I do think it will help open doors as well. So, if there are women who are thinking about wanting to be a part of leading bigger, it just can't hurt to have a seminary education.

[00:12:01] **Elisa Morgan:** Or deeper

[00:12:02] **Vivian Mabuni:** Yeah, deeper and wider, right?

[00:12:04] **Elisa Morgan:** Excellent. Help me understand this. You've mentioned that you have put your toe in the water at a different seminary and yet I know you're on the board at Denver Seminary. Why do you think Denver Seminary is so uniquely suited to take this offering on and extend it?

[00:12:23] **Vivian Mabuni:** Oh, this is a great question, and I am so proud of Denver Seminary. It's kind of fun when I can, with abandon, invite everyone to come here. Several reasons. I think that Denver Seminary honors women. There's a lot of confusion out there. I had one class that I took last semester, and it was taught by two women. One was complementarian and one was egalitarian. And to see two women together, being able to teach a class, there's a generosity at Denver where intentionally not extreme on one side or the other. So, I believe there are over 50 denominations that are included here in the seminary represented. But the environment specifically for women is that there's just arms are open wide. And I love that because I think that there have been, I have had friends who've been in seminary that they were not necessarily welcome. And some of the men had issue that the women were there. So that's huge. And I think also the charitable orthodoxy, this is one of the hallmarks of the seminary. And in a time when our nation is so splintered and we find ourselves so polarized it's rare to find a space where we can have dialogue, learn from one another, be open to differing viewpoints. But there's such a commitment to the Word of God as the plumb line. And so, there's a trust in even the resources. Because for me, even as a Bible teacher, I want to know that I have good resources that I'm using. But I don't sometimes know who to trust, like, which commentaries, there's hundreds, thousands, right? And so, to know that Denver has taken the time, painstakingly taken the time, to offer peer reviewed journal articles, that I can go to the Denver Seminary Library and know that these resources are sifted through to know that they're solid. And so, for me, it gives me peace of mind as I dig deeper. And this is what's interesting too, is as I've been writing these papers, I would never push myself to read as deeply or as widely as I would without the homework assignment. Because I would probably just take one commentary and be like, okay, that's fine. But here, having to really dig in and find other resources and learn to research, learn to think theologically, biblically, I mean, all of these skills are so valuable. So, I just, I can't say enough great things and the faculty are so phenomenal. I'm just blown away at the excellence.

[00:15:14] **Elisa Morgan:** I don't know if you can pull this up spur of the moment, because I'm not warning you in advance of this question, but can you share an illustration of a way God has been moving and meeting you just in your current experience in this cohort and something he's inviting you into, or he's challenging you, or he's changing your mind on. What kind of educational moment are you having yourself?

[00:15:42] **Vivian Mabuni:** Well, I think I could spend like an hour or two, you know, if you and I sat down with coffee to answer that, but there's a couple things that come to mind. One is that we have mentored formation.

[00:15:56] **Elisa Morgan:** And what is that?

[00:15:57] **Vivian Mabuni:** So that is kind of an emphasis on spiritual formation and character formation, which I think is so needed because a lot of times seminary just seems like it's a very heady, ivory tower type of endeavor where it's all in your head. And it's not the character and the lived out, our emotions, being attuned to the Lord and aware of what's going on. So, to have an emphasis on spiritual formation has been so valuable. So, being challenged to have my character, like intentionally working on certain aspects and having that as a backdrop as I go along has been so rich. So, as I am currently in a moment where I'm needing to trust the Lord, that's my character formation is trusting the Lord, trusting my husband, trusting myself. That was what I wrote out. And to have a mentor, that's part of my homework assignment, is to find a mentor and to meet with her regularly and to have this kind of input at this point in my life has been so valuable. So that's definitely one part of it.

[00:17:04] **Elisa Morgan:** So, you pick your own, of your own choosing, things you see in your character that God wants to work on. So, you picked trust.

[00:17:12] **Vivian Mabuni:** Yes, I did.

[00:17:13] **Elisa Morgan:** Trust of God, trust of your husband, trust of yourself. Okay, and then you pick a mentor and work on this.

[00:17:19] **Vivian Mabuni:** Yeah. And so that that has just been worth everything. And then on top of that, Elisa, just the word of God just coming alive and again, being reminded of basic Bible study techniques, which I'm familiar with having been in ministry for so long, but just rediscovering and learning and filling in the gaps even of the intertestamental times and just learning like, wow, God's word is just incredible and so thorough, and I'm just blown away right now. I'm in New Testament. And so, you know, Luke is the author of Luke and Acts, and it was probably one volume, but the is it chiasm?

[00:18:07] **Elisa Morgan:** Yes.

[00:18:07] **Vivian Mabuni:** That structure where it goes wide to a central point, and then it kind of goes wide out again, kind of like an hourglass? That, and looking at the Gospel of Luke and Acts as together. I mean, there's just things I would have not picked up. Yes, my mind is blown. I would not pick that up by myself. And so just falling in love with God's Word in a fresh way, that has been amazing. Now I would have to say the cohort has come at such a tender time for me where I have struggled with my leadership, I've struggled with trusting myself and to have these women come alongside and pray for me and encourage me, I just, I feel like there's just been such a fierce strength that has come with, we can share the hard stuff and we're in this together and we're investing in not only our degrees, but in each other's lives. And so that to me, I think I have yet to leave a class where I'm just not incredibly grateful. And in the cohort, we are sitting under the teaching of Dr. Don Payne right now and Professor John Morland. And my goodness the kinds of conversations we are having are just unmatched. It's just been rich. I think everyone, every single person, it's like this has been so worthwhile and I'm so glad I said yes.

[00:19:40] **Elisa Morgan:** And we just want to emphasize here. Your age doesn't matter. There are young, young women involved who may be straight out of college. There are older women who are in their fifties and sixties, you know, so just paying attention to that. Viv, I want to close with an illustration that you and I have talked about several times in our relationship. And I actually want to ask you to pray after I give this illustration. Because I feel strongly, and I know you do too, that as women who've been called into leadership, invited in, said yes, and we put our hands on the doorknobs and opened those doors and God, ushered us through. Early, early in ministry, God whispered to me through his Holy Spirit, Elisa, put your foot in that door for the next woman who is coming after you. And so, I always have, and sometimes I've been shocked at who was invited through after me. And sometimes it's been somebody I feel like gone and had a rope and grabbed him and drug him through, you know, and sometimes it's been somebody who practically opened the door for themselves. But in any case, we are called to encourage one another, to accept and encourage one another and usher in all the gifts for God's beautiful kingdom. So right now, Viv let's pray for those women who are listening right now, those brothers in Christ who were listening and they're thinking of a woman in their lives or someone they know that the door is open, and we've got our foot in that door for you. Would you be courageous enough to put your hand on that doorknob and see if it opens for you? Viv, would you pray?

[00:21:13] **Vivian Mabuni:** I would love to. Father, I want to thank you that you are here, and you are with us, and you are with all of the listeners to this podcast right now. And I thank you that there are no accidents, that for whoever is listening, that you brought to hear this particular conversation, and you've already been stirring in their hearts. I pray, God, that you would be continuing to move and continuing to confirm, continuing to provide. I pray God that you would bring together another amazing group of women for the next cohort and the cohort after that. I pray for lifelong friendships that would form. I pray for women to be formally educated through seminary, through Denver Seminary, to be able to go out and change the world. And I thank you that it is about you. And we give you all the glory, Lord. You are the one to put things on our hearts. You are the one to lead and guide and direct and confirm. And so, I just lift each of the listeners to you and pray your spirit would guide and lead and direct in Jesus' name. Amen.

[00:22:37] **Elisa Morgan:** Thanks, Viv. And thank you for joining us for this conversation. We are just so grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us. That link again for the women's leadership cohort that Vivian founded is denverseminary.edu/WLC. You can help us out by leaving a rating or a review wherever you listen to podcasts and send any questions or comments to us at podcast@Denverseminary.Edu. In addition, visit denverseminary.edu for more information and resources such as events and degree programs and other episodes of Engage360, including full transcripts. We're grateful for your interest, your support, and your prayers. Until next time, may the Lord bless you.