

Engage360 Episode 148 | Dr. Mark Young: A Presidential Retrospective; Dr. Mark Young

Angie Ward: Hello, friends. Welcome to Engage 360, Denver Seminary's podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Angie Ward, and we are grateful for you joining us for today's conversation. I am especially honored today to be the host for this conversation. Today on the podcast, our guest is Dr. Mark Young, who is the president of Denver Seminary. He has served here since 2009. And recently, earlier this year, Dr. Young, or Mark, announced that he was going to be retiring from the presidential role effective at the end of this year. So we have him until December 31st, 2024, after that, he will be moving into a chancellor role. We'll talk about that a little bit more. I could read his entire bio. You can find that on the Denver Seminary website. But I'd much prefer to just talk with him and let some of those details emerge. This is a chance for, me to chat with him for you all as listeners, about his experience as president, what, he's learned, how the seminary has been shaped, just a wide range of things as kind of a retrospective as he wraps up at Denver seminary. So Mark, I'm honored that I was invited to do this and so glad you're here.

[00:01:28] **Mark Young:** Oh, thanks Angie. It's a pleasure to not only spend some time with you, but also to think about these last few years and how they brought together a lot of different threads and themes in my life and in Priscilla's life, my wife's life as well.

[00:01:45] **Angie Ward:** Yeah, I bet. I bet. Let's get started, if you would just kind of briefly trace some of your moves and how you ended up at Denver Seminary.

[00:01:53] **Mark Young:** Okay. So, Priscilla and I married in the early 1980s, 80, 81 to be exact. And then we moved to Vienna, Austria, where we worked in a theological education program in the former Soviet block. We were writing curriculum. It was being translated and then taken into those countries quietly. And then we would travel and meet with groups of pastors who were working through that curricula. And we did that for a period of time, then took a short break for a doctoral program in the Chicago area. Then in 1988, we moved into Poland, as a, now a family with two young children. And so we lived in Poland from 1988 to 1995. Of course, that's when communism collapsed in the region. And, we start, helped start. Theological school in Poland in the western part of Poland came back to the U. S. In 1995, I went on faculty at Dallas Seminary, teaching world missions, missiology. intercultural communication, those kinds of courses. And then, alongside of being on faculty at Dallas, I took a position, as a pastor and like an executive pastor in a growing church plant. We just exploded. And so we were scrambling to try to create some order and process to help all these people grow in Christ. And then, came in 2009 here. these people grow in Christ. in 2009 here. That's kind of a brief, that's a snapshot of years

[00:03:30] **Angie Ward:** And well, so you frequently refer to yourself, as the adult a lifelong educator. where did that passion come from and did you have a, ever have a specific sense of calling to theological education in particular? How did that develop?

[00:03:46] **Mark Young:** Thanks. well, let me just preface this by saying, I grew up in Appalachia, in West Virginia, and my dad was the first person in, our family to go to high school. And, he finished high school and then, served in the military and eventually took a job in our local, little town in a bank. So there wasn't really this history of higher education, but my mom and my dad, both encouraged me to go to college, so I did. and, and the truth is, I was that kind of obnoxious kid that loved school. I, loved reading, I loved the learning process. And so, I just, I loved it. Was enthralled that I could go to the local university, Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. And, you know, at that time I also got involved with a campus ministry and my faith came alive.

And I began to sense that the Lord was leading me into full time ministry. And so it was really natural for me to imagine being in full time ministry as an educator because of my love for learning. And also for teaching and communicating. So when I look back on those years, I think my sense of response to God's call to go to ministry was a call to be an educator. And so throughout my many, my several decades of ministry, I've always seen theological educator as my primary calling.

[00:05:28] **Angie Ward:** but you spent time in Vienna and then in Poland. So how does the, how did the missions piece enter into that and then combine with the education?

[00:05:37] **Mark Young:** Yeah. So, you know, it's interesting in the summer of 1979. I went to Poland, as a part of a short term mission endeavor, and we spent the summer teaching the Bible in these, Roman Catholic renewal camps in the mountains of southern Poland. And while we were there and doing that teaching, not only was there great joy in the teaching, but there was a deep recognition that we were, I lived in a place in the United States that it's where access to the teaching and books and knowledge about scripture was rich and full. And yet we were in a part of the world where the folks who were coming, many of them had never read the Bible before they, they had Catholic identity, they had faith in Jesus, but they'd not taken advantage of any access to systematic teaching about scripture, about what they believed. And so the sense of need coupled with this sense of calling came together, for us to go back to the region in 1981 and be involved in theological education in the Soviet bloc. I should add pretty quickly that my wife Priscilla had grown up in Ethiopia. Her dad was a surgeon, with a mission agency. She'd lived there. for eight of her, childhood years coming back to the United States, as a junior in high school. And so she already was, aiming to move back overseas. She had missionary kid bent to want to go back to somewhere else. so when we came together as a couple, we both were committed. To following the Lord's leading wherever it might be, whether it was Africa or Europe, we ended up in Europe because of the experience I'd had there in 79.

[00:07:32] **Angie Ward:** Wow. Well, so of all these experiences, you know, overseas, faculty at Dallas, president here, the, executive pastor type role, I mean, touch upon some of the experiences that when you look back you say, man, these were kind of formational in shaping my leadership and what you brought, you know, what, you look back today as president after this many these years.

[00:07:57] **Mark Young:** Yeah, that's a good question. I think there, there are different, obviously there are different ways to imagine leadership because the different settings we find ourselves in. but from, my point of view, the first time there was an organizational leadership experience was in Poland. Because in 1990, we started a theological school, and by that I mean there were five of us who came together, three of us were full time, and then we had about 20 students, right? So we're not talking about this massive institution.

[00:08:32] **Angie Ward:** like a class Almost,

[00:08:33] **Mark Young:** Almost, yeah. But, everything had to be done. So, you still had to put together curricula, you still had to think about financial models. Right. Right. You still had to think about space, you had to think about educational models, all the, all of that came together, even in a very small scale, for me in, those early years, those early 90s, in that school in Poland. and what I found particularly exciting was a couple, well, several things. But one was the idea that leadership is really creating a sense of direction. As well as the type of resourcing and settings that are necessary for other people to exercise their gifts and talents, right? So you're a facilitator in many regards, right? You set that course of this is who we want to be, and then you create the resourcing and the

settings that are necessary for folks to do that. And I found I find tremendous joy in imagining that the work that I do actually empowers and sets free others to exercise their gifts in a way that's coordinated and meaningful for the purpose that you've come together. So then when we came, to the church, I would say academic leadership for me has always been my comfort zone. But when we came to the church and this church was built around a very prominent preacher. And so we had lots of people and very little structure. We were scrambling trying to catch up with creating programs and structures and, resources that would allow these people to really grow in Christ. So we were always behind. So we were making decisions. And frankly, many we were forced, I'll put it that way, to make decisions before we had a lot of time to figure out what it was we wanted to do because the needs were so pressing. And, I think one of the things I take away from that, time, as in, in that setting was the simple fact that you're never going to know everything you want to know as a leader, but you still have to lead. So you make decisions based on what you do know and you obviously entrust them to the Lord and if it doesn't work, then you pivot and go another direction to accomplish the same. Objective. I think when I came here to the seminary as president, obviously that scenario was unlike anything I'd done before. And I would say when I came right after the financial crisis of 2008, a year after unplanned presidential transition, I think there was some shock in the system and some trauma. and clearly, from a financial perspective, the seminary was, not on great footing at that time. So once again, you know, I, found myself in a leadership environment where we needed to take some drastic steps, needed to set a course and direction that was going to embody and encompass the whole, and do that not having all of the information that we wished we would have. And so, as I think back as a leader over the years, it's that willingness to lead, even though you never have enough breadth or depth of knowledge, that courage to lead, I'll say it that way, and then the willingness to absorb the price, pay the price, because that, those decisions will create, some distress for some people, and then adapt needed. When things don't quite turn out, if things don't quite turn out the you wanted them to.

[00:12:37] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Well that kind of leads into my next question, about just the changing landscape and speaking of having to make more decisions more quickly with this, you know, less information or just in a rapidly shifting environment. How is the landscape different now? And I'm asking that broadly. I'll let you pick how to define that from when you first stepped into the presidency in 2009. So landscape at Denver Seminary, landscape theological ed, landscape culturally. I would think we'd have, had some significant shifts.

[00:13:10] **Mark Young:** Correct. Yeah. let me just begin by something I read recently., former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General Mike Milley, has talked and written about the fact that in today's world, if you're in a combat situation. You really have about three hours before the technology utilized by the other, other side will locate you and attempt to destroy you. So you have to constantly be adapting tactics and moving rather than these long embedded kinds of conflicts we used to have. And in some ways I think if I were to compare 2024 to 2009, The, the need for us to have even more agility to adapt to opportunities, to adapt to threats, whether they're demographic threats or whether they're, financial threats or other types of challenges. The need for us to be able to make decisions and exercise and move forward in some type of an agile fashion is more acute than ever. I don't envision that changing. the challenge of higher ed, of course, is that you're working in an industry that has layered with traditions, many of them decades, if not centuries old. And I think it would be fair to say that as an industry, higher ed hasn't been known as one that's willing to have that kind of institutional agility that's going to be even more important we move forward. So that's just like a long. Discourse on context. We think in terms of in the administration, we think in terms of models, right? So we think that we have to have an educational model that addresses the needs of what is a different student population than we had 20 years ago, we have to have a financial model that has resilience for ups and downs. Right. that we're going to face in the years ahead and then an organizational or leadership model that gives us that agility. And so, from my

perspective, each of those three models today is dramatically different than it was in 2009 for Denver Seminary. And we're much better positioned now to meet demands I think we were when came and have been in recent years.

[00:15:37] **Angie Ward:** you came in Denver Seminary. We're going to be celebrating our 75th anniversary next year. so you've been here for a good percentage of that. When you came here, had you been, how familiar had you been with Denver Seminary? I mean, you were in Theological Ed World. how familiar, and then, What did you learn about its legacy that, you know, you were like, Oh, that's new or inspiring that you've tried to maintain, even in the midst of building that agility,

[00:16:05] **Mark Young:** Yeah. I was aware of the seminary for a long time, even as I was in my own seminary experience in the 70s. and largely because of Vernon Grounds and his influence in a broader slice of evangelicalism. Now, to be honest, the seminary I attended had some rather critical things to say about Dr. Grounds. from time to time, but certainly, he was known and the seminary was known at that time, the conservative Baptist theological seminary, right? So when I came, I had that awareness in general of the seminary. I'd actually interviewed for a position here in the early two thousands. when, the previous president, Dr. Williford, was wanting to do a global, international leadership, type of program. but this just wasn't the right time, for us from a family perspective. So I knew Dr. Williford, I knew Randy McFarland, I knew, Danny Carroll. So I had some, awareness. And my perspective is that, actually, Denver Seminary, at that point, I felt was better positioned to engage and work with the global church than some of the seminaries that had developed more narrow theological perspectives and weren't as ecumenically oriented, within the evangelical, tent, from a missions background, once you, find yourself in a, in an environment where you don't have all the resources that, You may have in this you really crystal, you really crystallize what is essential for us. And it's always the gospel, right? And then the other things you consider less, critical, less important. I can, work alongside and praise and learn from people who have different view of eschatology than I do a different view of the church than I do or whatever. And so I felt Denver Seminary was beautifully positioned to continue to have. a posture that served the global church more than some of the more theologically definite or narrow schools. And then I would say, you know, when I came, Vernon was the person that I felt I needed to know better in order to capture and understand the heart of Denver Seminary. So I spent several months researching, reading his letters, I think. There were some old sermons that we were able to find and listen to and, realize that still, in 2009, Vernon's influence was significant culturally.

[00:18:46] **Angie Ward:** How long did you overlap before he passed away? How long did you have some chance to be with him personally?

[00:18:51] **Mark Young:** I had one year with Vernon.

[00:18:53] **Angie Ward:** Oh, just one.

[00:18:54] **Mark Young:** Yep, one year Priscilla and I would, visit Vernon and Ann, his wife, in their senior living facility that first year. We were living not far from them, so. It was a wonderful year. They were gracious. They were so encouraging and welcoming, to us. and, we had the extra benefit of having Gordon McDonald in our community as well. Gordon and Vernon were very close and after Vernon moved, to Kansas and then passed away, Gordon really became that culture bearer in the way that Vernon had been.

[00:19:31] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Yeah. One of, you know, you talked about kind of a more, a little more broad doctrinal as opposed to narrow. One of the things that was, in the early years of your presidency was to examine kind of our mission statement and put forth a new mission statement that has carried us to this day with the centrality of the gospel. Tell a little bit about that process and how you crystallize to what our current statement is today. Okay.

[00:19:55] **Mark Young:** Yeah, thanks. that's a good question. So when, when I came, I felt that the way the seminary was known had narrowed considerably. And so, we had programs that weren't necessarily captured in the way that mission was being articulated around the theme of leadership. and then frankly, I believe and have believed for many years that theological education can't just be an internal dialogue, like an intramural sport. You know, so I've said a lot of folks think of theological schools as Christians helping Christians learn how to help Christians be better Christians,

[00:20:38] **Angie Ward:** right?

[00:20:39] **Mark Young:** And so, and what's missing in that is the world. So, we felt like we needed to turn seminary education. Inside out, right? So that what we do, we believe is making a difference in the lives of people who don't yet know Christ, who are coming to know Christ. So we put those things together and came up with engage the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the gospel and the life changing truth of scripture, engage the needs of the world, then encompass all of our programming and then gospel and scripture with two of the linchpins upon which the seminary had been founded. as it moved out of the, as the conservative Baptist movement was shaped in the 1950s. So, those were the components of it. and then, you know, I, felt like we needed to kind of crystallize what matters to us. What, are our values or what commitments have we made? And that's when we came up with the five core commitments, in. The faculty approved the new, and the board, mission statement commitments I believe 2010.

[00:21:41] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. So shortly after you, you arrived in 2009. and core Yeah. in well, so, you know, talking about changing landscape, what are you've seen a lot, you know, globally and in the United States, what are the biggest challenges you see ahead for theological education and for seminaries in this changing environment?

[00:22:01] **Mark Young:** Yeah, well, I think in evangelicalism, the broad spectrum of evangelicalism, we have to admit that there has always been an impulse toward a do it yourself kind of Christianity, very individualized, very personalized, view of scripture, view of what it means to be saved. and in, in many regards. That then translates into a large swath of evangelicalism where theological, formal theological education isn't considered necessary for someone to lead a local congregation. So, most seminary education, most seminary programs originally were designed around pastoral education, right? And so, as that larger swath of evangelicalism, both non denominational and some denominations, that don't require formal theological education, we've had to adapt and say, what are other programs that will be meaningful for the church as it relates to the world? so I think that one of the challenges we face is that the value of a seminary degree is under question for a lot of folks. And so if a student can't say, what I need this degree. I want this degree, a Master of Divinity, or a Master of Arts in Leadership, or Master of Arts in New Testament, or Old Testament, or whatever. If a student can't say, I need this to pursue the calling God has laid on my life, then why would they invest thousands of dollars and thousands of hours of work for it? to pursue a degree, right? So the diminishing value of higher education in general and specifically the perceived diminishing value of theological education is probably the biggest threat we face. so, I mean, I talked to other presidents and some would say, you know, the biggest threat we face is secularization or an government or whatever. And I don't think in those terms. The biggest threat we face is that we

haven't yet created or figured out the programming that a large number of evangelicals who want to pursue a calling in their lives, say they need or they want. So we have to increase and create programming that the student population, potential student population says, I want that. And then you have to say, okay, how do we make that accessible? Because most students, most of our students, aren't going to, aren't going to be able to relocate. Many of them, the strong majority of them, are in their adult years. They're parenting or they're in the midst of a career. So then we have to say how can they access those programs in ways that fit their lives As opposed to creating programming and requiring them to blow up their lives to come and take advantage of it. So, those two questions, I think, will remain dominant for us as we think about the future of theological education.

[00:25:20] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. When I was a student and I graduated in the mid 1990s, so came left just before you, you came and now we get to reconvene. But, you know, it was the, what I would say, probably the old model of you, you blew up your life. You, but I was also. 22 or 23. Most of us came, lived on campus for several years. We were taking 12 to 15 credit hours. You know, it was unusual to have someone is who is in their 30s or certainly in their 40s with children. and I know that's, I don't know that many people understand how the demographic has shifted considerably. So tell a little bit about what the current student body and demographics, how that has changed what it looks like today. A typical student.

[00:26:06] **Mark Young:** three big shifts, I think. We need to pay attention to, one, you mentioned the average age. So the average age of our student population is above 35. So it will be somewhere around 35, 36, at least it has been in the last couple of years. And we're seeing an interesting number of learners who are coming back late in their careers, or having finished their careers, where they're saying, you know, I've served the church, I sensed God's call in my life at one point, And now I feel the freedom to pursue it wholeheartedly, right? for those folks, many of them, and certainly for those who in the midst of their professional lives or raising their families, coming here is just not an option. are it simply isn't possible because they don't see the resources to blow up their lives. So, that whole question of age and location, those are still very much a part of the equation. And then another really interesting, change, I personally believe and we're seeing that more women are stepping into formal theological education to have the equipping that they want to pursue God's call in their life. And so, both in our counseling arena where we've always had a majority of students who are women, but in other programs as well. We're starting to see more and more women, come and thank God, praise God for that. We're thrilled that we are creating an environment where women feel comfortable and can pursue their calling. I think the third thing that we, have to admit as well that the cost, the financial cost of theological education is just too severe. So we either have to create more economically viable models at a lower cost, or we have to create increased subsidies or scholarships for students to be able to come. So, all of those things have factor into how we envision fulfilling our mission in the lives of those students too.

[00:28:15] **Angie Ward:** so that you've started to answer, you know, what does a seminary need to not only survive, but to thrive in this new environment? And again, it's a medieval model, you know, so it's a 1000 year old institutional model. So how do you move from not just surviving, which many schools are dealing with to truly thriving?

[00:28:34] **Mark Young:** Well, thanks for asking that. We've certainly tried to address it. I'll go back to the three models I talked about earlier. We have created an educational model now that is more accessible to those students who can't relate. By God's grace, we've created a financial model that isn't as sensitive to downturns in tuition as part of our operating revenue. And we've created, we've begun to create a leadership organizational model that can be responsive. So, clearly, that kind of

change has, been embraced by some, rejected by others, and then, by more people than not, a, well, okay, I'll do

[00:29:21] **Angie Ward:** it, is. Yeah.

[00:29:22] **Mark Young:** I'll do it because I have to, and, you know, I'll, be the first to say, I sensed a tremendous threat to Denver Seminary, in 2018, 2019. As the enrollment, numbers began to, compress a bit and financially we were doing okay, but there was just a sense of urgency. And so we began to put into place and made some really difficult and, I would say now very significant decisions. One was, as you remember, selling our campus housing. which literally is like 20 yards from my window here. I remember looking out the window of my office thinking, I feel like I'm selling the bedrooms out of my own house.

[00:30:19] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. Cutting an arm off or something. Yeah.

[00:30:22] **Mark Young:** yeah. But, when we looked at changing enrollment patterns, when we looked at the financial model of owning that housing, and how if we sold it, we would create an asset mix that gave us more flexibility. Exactly. it, was pretty clear we needed to do it. Hugely controversial and very difficult emotionally, but, very necessary for us. and then the other thing is making the decision that all of our programming needs to be accessible in a fully online format. that's a jolt to the system. it creates a sense of loss. For those whose vision of being a professor is being in a classroom with a group of students. And by the way, we still will do that. every degree, every program available fully in person and fully online. But there's just this shock to the system that what I thought I was going to be as a faculty member may not be exactly my experience. and there's, you know, a sense of fear that maybe I won't be able to do it or maybe it won't work. Good. So the emotional impact of making a broad decision like that, has been significant throughout our community and, and for all of us along the way. So, you know, I would say as a community, as a whole, we've turned, mostly turned the corner on those bigger decisions. And that the majority of our community is saying, yeah, we have to go these directions. And then we created the resourcing I talked about earlier with technology, with instructional design, and with staff to help create the kinds of online learning experiences that mirror the excellence we have in the classroom.

[00:32:18] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. You talk about shock to the system. And in the midst of all this, also cove it enter cove it and a global pandemic in 2020, and, so, you know, as we're having to pivot to, we're already in the process of trying to go, okay, we need to pivot online. Well, then we had to You know, for survival, you know, yeah, talk about some of those challenges. I know that selling the on campus housing was, you know, just a, like you said, huge challenge, very emotional and then right then that same time boom pandemic. So, yeah, what influences is that had?

[00:32:55] **Mark Young:** Look, everybody was scrambling. The whole nation was scrambling. And add to that the fact that starting in the mid 2010s, We as a nation were becoming more and more unable to have good conversations about controversial issues, right? So there was this bent toward divisiveness and criticism that infected the church, unfortunately, just as it had infected the broader society. So every decision you made all of a sudden was politicized and created a division, right? So we're gonna say, well, we'll follow the direction of our county health authority in terms of how we gather and how we organize ourselves during COVID. And then that becomes usually controversial. And then all that to say, the years, the COVID years created stress in the systems and mostly in the relationships that we were, we needed to be able to move forward in these arenas of adaptation and change. So, yes, it was a very difficult period. We had a transition in academic leadership as well,

and that, that was difficult. all that to say, I think there is still some baked in trauma, and there are, still, there is still some important work to do to help create more of a cohesive sense of all of us pushing together. that the seminary is facing.

[00:34:37] **Angie Ward:** Yeah, you mentioned the, increasing polarization, in our country and politically, as we're recording this, we're coming up into another presidential election, and, with all that brings, and then evangelicalism is situated, you know, in there and, is also becoming polarized or fractured for sure, where do you see Denver Seminary being located and what is our role to play in the middle of all this going on?

[00:35:06] **Mark Young:** Oh, thank you for asking that question. So one of the things that I believe Vernon helped create and the community has carried forward is that is what we dubbed charitable orthodoxy, right? The willingness to say there are these core things that we agree about and we're going to lovingly learn from one another in the areas where we disagree, right? So the core. Doctrine of the faith. That's the orthodoxy. The charitable part is saying, I want to listen. I want to learn. And in listening and learning, my own perspectives will be broadened and enriched, right? So there's that cultural value here at the seminary that I think is, has positioned us well. And then in 2019, in light of what you just described, we started an entity here at the seminary called the Gospel Initiative. And the purpose of the gospel initiative is to help those of us who know Christ have better conversations about divisive issues in our society and in the church so that our testimony of the gospel is enhanced. And I would say to you that one of the things that I'm most thankful for has been the growth of the gospel initiative and its ability to have these really hard conversations. in a way that enhances our credibility because they're more informed and enhances the compelling nature of the truth of the gospel because they're charitable in nature. So, you know, I think leadership in this kind of setting where you can create division by taking hard and fast positions or by demonizing somebody else, is always counterproductive. It's, our job to be able to say, as leaders, let's have a conversation about it, let's think it through, let's hear different perspectives, and make sure we're learning and loving, learning from and loving, one another in the process. We don't always Succeed, but that's our goal.

[00:37:12] **Angie Ward:** Right, exactly. And I've heard you refer to, you know, Denver Seminary occupying, you know, the magnificent middle. And, and I love that phrase, you know, I think for a while there was, the trend, certainly culturally or nationally has been to that polarization. And it was like, is there even a place for that? But it seems like through the gospel initiative and other things, that's just been a distinctive hallmark of Denver Seminary since its founding.

[00:37:39] **Mark Young:** Correct.

[00:37:40] **Angie Ward:** Probably and needed now more than ever.

[00:37:43] **Mark Young:** Yes. You know, it's interesting, Angie, I, because I have a few years behind me, when I go back and I think of Vernon and his presidency, he was often being criticized because of the view of, the lack of a clear view of eschatology,

[00:37:59] **Angie Ward:** yeah, that was a big one for us back then.

[00:38:01] **Mark Young:** Right, so we're talking , he was criticized because he was willing to engage meaningfully in the civil rights conversation, right? So Vernon was seeking middle ground that preserved the truth of the gospel and express the truth of the gospel in those divisive issues. So I

think what we're trying to do with the gospel initiative in my opinion, a direct result of Vernon's influence along the way. So we were outside the U S in the eighties, right, came back in 95 and we came back to a, an evangelicalism that we'd never known. because when we left, there wasn't this level of polarization. There wasn't this politicization of evangelical and evangelicalism. And we came back to the politics of nihilism where you really aren't working towards solutions. You're working to defeat the other people. that's terribly discouraging, but it gives the church an opportunity to create a contrast, right? So our job is not to win the debate. Our job is to help solve the dilemmas that we face. So when we translate the debates that we're having, and recognize that actually we're talking about something that we both believe is a dilemma, we can begin search, searching for solutions. That I think is a huge transition that, we as a school, and evangelicalism as a whole, we have to be diligent to preserve that commitment to find solutions rather than win debates.

[00:39:37] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. I love how you put Well, so let's turn it a little bit, more personally to you and your, you know, experience as president. How have you changed and been changed through your experience and your years as president?

[00:39:50] **Mark Young:** I think that the, well, I'll back up and say it this way. When I, told two friends, that I was going to be president of Dever Seminary, one of them said, be yourself. And the other one said, be presidential. And so, I've attempted to do both of those things. And what I've observed through the, through these years is that it was the willingness to be myself and be presidential and the price that exacted, that I didn't anticipate. I'm never not the president of Denver Seminary.

[00:40:41] **Angie Ward:** Yeah, I remember we thought you said, you're, not only the president, but you're never not

[00:40:46] **Mark Young:** That's right. Never not the president and never just the president, right?

[00:40:50] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:40:50] **Mark Young:** And so, I think for me, I, I didn't pay enough attention to the mental, emotional and physical cost price that I was paying, bearing the sense of responsibility for the whole. So what I learned about what did I learn about myself? I learned about myself that if I'm not intentional. And if I'm not consciously being challenged to truly trust the Lord with the decisions that we make and the consequences that we make. I know that sounds trite and trivial, but I took too much of the burden myself and in that paid a pretty heavy price. I now look back and I recognize That in many, ways, I was living out perhaps, a lack of faith, a lack of truly trusting the Lord. Now, if you were to ask me to write a book on, well, how do you transition from being anxious to trusting the Lord? I would say the same thing that we've said through the years when people ask us to write a book on marriage. We don't know.

[00:42:08] **Angie Ward:** Yeah.

[00:42:09] **Mark Young:** But we know that's what we want. We want to trust the Lord in every year of our lives. I want to trust the Lord more in this leadership space.

[00:42:19] **Angie Ward:** Yeah,

[00:42:20] **Mark Young:** So I think I learned from, I think what I've learned, Angie, is I, took too much, of the burden and didn't choose, I'll say it that way, to share that burden with others and to truly entrust it to the Lord.

[00:42:40] **Angie Ward:** Thanks for sharing honestly. Yeah. Yeah. About that. What are your priorities given, you know, the landscape, the things you've learned about yourself and just kind of to ensure a transition.

[00:42:53] **Mark Young:** Yeah. you know, I think the temptation when you've said you're going to retire on a certain date, kind of slip into a Hippocratic Oath type of leadership. Do no harm, right?

[00:43:04] **Angie Ward:** Right.

[00:43:04] **Mark Young:** is to try not to, Blow the thing up before you're done. But that's not my style. So I think we're pressing very hard into the strategies that we've said we need to execute to be that educational model, financial model, organizational model.

We need to be. There are a couple of areas I'm really excited about. I'm very interested in exploring a different way of thinking about educating folks called competency based education. So we have a small task force working toward seeing how that might, be something we can adopt that serves more students. and then, you know, frankly, we cannot ignore that technology is more and more a part of our lives and even our sense of being. So, I think it's really important for us to have good conversations about how can we utilize something like AI, which we already are, we just don't know it. How can we utilize intentionally AI, to improve our effectiveness and to expand our, reach. So both of those things I think are critical for us. So I've got a couple of different groups of folks together having good conversations that then we can transition to the next president.

[00:44:25] **Angie Ward:** Yeah, you shared about, you know, the, tension of being yourself and being presidential. And that was a surprise or I don't know about a surprise, but, counting the cost of that. What's something fun that has surprised you about the job or life of being president over these years?

[00:44:43] **Mark Young:** Working with donors.

[00:44:45] **Angie Ward:** Oh, wow. Tell us about that? Yeah.

[00:44:48] **Mark Young:** Priscilla and I together. have, had the joy of building relationships with men and women whose joy in giving has inspired us, to be even more generous in relationship to the work of Christ. We've been invited into very sacred spaces, very personal conversations. We've been invited into family tragedies. We've been invited into family joys. And along the way, had just the, joy. The joy of seeing God build deep and long lasting relationships. and then, you know, I think it's also been a tremendous joy for me to work with trustees, to help create a culture of leadership with our board that understands institutional dynamics and then, unleash their wisdom and their power for the good of the seminary. That's also been And then seeing young faculty members, some whom were students when I came now step into roles. That's the joy of the educator, right? You live out this wonderful sense that God is multiplying your efforts through folks that you've had a part of been of their lives. And that's, exciting. That's really joyful as Well,

[00:46:16] **Angie Ward:** That's great. Yeah. So what's something most other people wouldn't know about the job or life of a president? Something maybe fun or unique. I, you know, I don't know how people, do people come up to you and it's like, well, this is just different than I thought. I'm sure everybody has an image of what your role requires. So what's something some other people might not know? Yeah. Yeah.

[00:46:38] **Mark Young:** that's a great question. you know, I, think, I think that's that a lot of folks may not understand the degree to which you're pulled in so many different right? So you make a decision and all of a sudden there are 10 different constituent groups that you have to relate to. And oftentimes in different ways to help communicate that decision, right? So it's that the breadth of, and diversity of constituent groups that are a part, make up a part of the broad, Denver Seminary community. And then being consciously aware of how's this going to affect donors, how's this going to affect alumni, faculty, staff, you know, the students. that, I think is, something that catches folks off guard. and then if you've never been an executive leader, you just can't possibly understand and know what it's like to bear the burden of an institution. And there I am talking about trusting the Lord and now saying, you know, bearing that burden. in fact, I would say, it's almost impossible to predict how someone's going to react to that burden of leadership, but that whole thing of never not being the president, that burden being always there, that sense of responsibility, that deep awareness of challenges and potential threats, alongside of successes and joys, that I think is, is a surprising part of the role. Folks who haven't been executive leaders may not necessarily know about.

[00:48:30] **Angie Ward:** yeah, Well, and as a side, I want to thank you for bearing that load for these years. since 2009, you know, it is a big one and takes a toll. and I, you know, I've thought about, I don't have to. Anytime the phone rings, which how often do I get a phone call, but or a text, you know, do I ever have to worry about now? What, you know, but, yeah, in that senior executive role for sure. That's a big part of it. Well, so, so let's look ahead. What will you be doing once you finish here December 31st personally and professionally?

[00:49:03] **Mark Young:** Yeah, so the seminary board has asked me to stay engaged in a part time role, which we're entitling Chancellor. And so, what that means for me is, I will be, and Priscilla, I am Priscilla, but I've got the title, we will be available to the president and to the next president and, their spouse in whatever ways they might find meaningful, right? So we're just, we're available to provide history and context to help explain the past. What do we see happening in the broader industry, right? Just whatever they want, we're, we hope, we pray will be available for them. And then, it also means introducing the new president to major donors and continuing to be a part of the lives of those with whom we've built these relationships through the years. so, those are the two things that the board has asked us to do and, we're eager, to step into that. beyond, the chancellor role, people ask us, so, you know, what are you going to do as if we need another full time job? And, so what we say is. We're going to take those first few months, and we're just going to let the burden pressure and the anxieties of being an executive leader leach out of our bodies. We're going to take some time, and we're going to heal, because I have had some physical challenges, and we're going to refresh ourselves. And then we're going to, as we've done our whole lives, hold our hands out and say, Lord, give us wisdom to know what you're laying in our hands and the courage to step into it.

[00:50:51] **Angie Ward:** Yeah. another thing I think is important for you to mention is how many grandchildren you have now that you did not have when you started. Talk a little bit about some of that personal stuff as

[00:51:00] **Mark Young:** Yeah. So, in the 15 years, the Lord has, given us two daughters in law and one son in law, and then eight grandchildren. And so, essentially our, whole time here has been undergirded by this great joy in seeing our family grow. I

[00:51:20] **Angie Ward:** enrollment is growing. you can report.

[00:51:23] **Mark Young:** That's right. and it's been, fun to share that part of our lives with the community. especially the external constituents. They've been very engaged and very encouraging as we've shared grandparenting stories. And surely, There's a, there's something about the common experience and goal of an educator believing that they're having some measure of impact in the next generation in grandparenting. There's just this delightful sense of continuity that you can continue to build into the lives of boys and girls who will be men and women who will make a difference for Jesus in the next generations. deeply satisfying, it's, hard to even describe.

[00:52:09] **Angie Ward:** Yeah, that's great. that's so I have two more questions, one kind of an organizational one or a presidential one, and then one a personal one. What would you hope to see and hear about Denver Seminary ten years from now?

[00:52:23] **Mark Young:** I think the right answer to that question, which is not the first answer that comes to my mind. I think the right answer to that question is that Denver Seminary is continuing to adapt and change as needed to fulfill its mission. That it's willing to step into these new spaces to continue to fulfill and expand its mission. the selfish answer to that question is I hope that initiatives like the Gospel Initiative where we're continuing to push seminary education out into those tough and divisive and difficult spaces and places and conversations in the world for the sake of the Gospel, will still be a part of Denver seminary's profile. And, you know, maybe the selfish part of that is that it'll still be called the Gospel Initiative. Because,

[00:53:11] **Angie Ward:** right, right.

[00:53:12] **Mark Young:** but I guess the more godly answer is that value and that activity still be a part of the seminary. That posture, that's the right still be a part of the seminary.

[00:53:24] **Angie Ward:** I think the posture and the DNA that's been embedded here. Well, so the personal one, as you look back, and you look back at being a kid in Hurricane West Virginia, and you just see the places God has taken you and to this moment, or these months here, and this experience and opportunity and role, I'm sure along the way, you've had many. How did I get here? Pinch me. You know, kind of moments or what did I do to deserve this perhaps, moments. But as you pray to the Lord and reflect on, and I'm, I know you've been doing a lot of reflection in that, what are you saying to the Lord right now? And, just seeing as his about his work and grace. And as you reflect on all that,

[00:54:07] **Mark Young:** Thank you, Lord. Yeah. There's a Yeah. It's a wonderful thing to live with a sense that you've been privileged to do what God called you to do. And that in that privilege has been this incredible opportunity to expand and understand and grow and to see God work in ways you never thought possible. I have this hard time imagining why would anybody not want that kind of life? Because it is. In every regard, so deeply satisfying and humbling. So, gratitude is the primary value, primary expression, that both Priscilla and I have. I think you'll find this interesting when, you know, my family's been in Putnam County, West Virginia for generations. And so, I don't think anybody before me has path that we've taken. And so when I called my dad in 2009 and said, dad,

I've been, you know, I'm, I'm being considered to be the president of Denver seminary and we're thinking pretty seriously about it. His first response was, well, you know, son, Mud River Baptist church down the road here is looking for a pastor. Maybe you ought to think about that. Right? So that sense of place that, My family had, has had for generations, has never left my dad, now at 93. My sense of adventure, my sense of wanting to be in the next place, my sense of wanting to experience more and more, never eradicated my love for my home, my love for my dad, my family. But. It also never created boundaries. So being able to think of a life that was able to step out of what had been some pretty deeply cultural boundaries and limits and see God work in magnificent ways and so many different ways, so many different places, just takes my breath away.

[00:56:34] **Angie Ward:** hope that, as, you depart from the presidency here and begin that process of just kind of recovering that you can also soak in and remember, and live into even more and more of those memories.

[00:56:49] **Mark Young:** Yeah. Thanks.

[00:56:50] **Angie Ward:** Yeah, Yeah, wow. Well, Mark, it has been a privilege to sit with you here in this conversation and, just hear, you know, your perspective and wisdom from this journey. I think all of our listeners would join me in saying we're, pray for you in these next season of transition as well as praying for the next leadership of Denver Seminary. And then for you and Priscilla and your family, as you make the transition out yet still with a foot in as chancellor at this place that we both love.

[00:57:20] **Mark Young:** Thank you for having me. It's a, it's an honor and a joy and it's very humbling to spend this time talking about all that God has done.

[00:57:29] **Angie Ward:** Thanks Mark. Wish you. God's blessing.

[00:57:32] **Mark Young:** Okay. God bless.

[00:57:33] **Angie Ward:** Friends. We are so grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us today. If you get the chance, please leave us a rating, a review wherever you listen to podcasts and please send any questions or comments to us at podcast@denverseminary.edu. You can also visit denverseminary.edu for more information and resources about Denver seminary, such as events, degree programs and other episodes of engaged 360, including full transcripts. We are grateful for your interest support and prayers for the seminary until the next time. May the Lord bless you.