

Engage360 Episode 159 | Conflict and the Pursuit of Peace

Dr. M.D. Kinoti

[00:00:00]

Tim Koller: Hi, friends. Welcome to Engage 360 Denver Seminaries podcast. I'm your host, Timothy Kohler. Thank you for joining us for today's conversation. I am delighted to have on the podcast today, Dr. Kinoti. Dr. Kinoti is the author of Making Peace with Fire. Harness harnessing conflict to transform your relationships. And I recently finished this book and I'm very excited to have Dr. Kinoti here on the podcast with us. One, because we get to talk about this fantastic book that he's written, but also because he recently joined the adjunct faculty in the leadership department at Denver Seminary. So Dr. Kinoti, welcome to the adjunct faculty in the leadership department and to the Engage 360 podcast.

M.D. Kinoti: Thank you, Tim. I'm excited to be here.

Tim Koller: So I would [00:01:00] love, as we get started with our conversation, for those that may not know who you are, can you tell us a little bit about the journey that you've been on, who you are that led you to being a faculty member, to writing this book, and just a little bit about the journey you've been on. I.

M.D. Kinoti: Once again, thank you for the invitation to be here and to share my story as well as to, share this book with your audience. I am also excited to, serve with, Denver Seminary as an adjunct faculty, and I'm looking forward to what that process is gonna look like in the next, whatever many years God gives us. I. born in Kenya in the eastern part of Kenya around Mount Kenya. So, my name wound, any Kenyan wound, betray me as a Meru, Meru. That's the tribe I'm born in. And of course, I go into that detail because it, shows up in the book as well, and it's relevant to [00:02:00] anybody who understands the tribal connections in an African context. raised, stood there in the, seventies, in the eighties, and, went to school from there. studied sociology and then went straight to working for a Christian NGO, world Vision International, and most of my nineties I spent doing community work and especially working in a different, community than my own. And again, that is relevant because that is where experience the real ostracizing of somebody who is from a different tribal community . And then afterwards I feel the call of God to do missions and therefore, together with my wife at the time and, our son, we, come to the United States to go to Fuller Theological Seminary in California where I, study a master's and, PhD and focus primarily on two things. One, leadership for my master's and then, PhD in peace [00:03:00] building. And I was blessed to study with, Really wonderful people in pastoral theology and focusing on how the church can be engaged or Christians ought to be engaged in issues of peace building in their communities. So that's that part of the journey. And then it takes a real interesting, turn.

After my studies, I'm thinking I'm gonna be a missionary in the traditional sense of missionary work, and then God opens a door for me to go back into the NGO world. And I end up doing water development with Lifewater International for a couple years. And, then I'm invited to Regis University, in Denver to be a professor of NGO Management and actually leadership and management. I. But focusing mostly on NGO management right now. running, there are two master's programs in NGO management as well as sustainable development. So that's a, this is, some of the journey [00:04:00] does, really touch on this subject, but a lot of it is also got to do with my background, which comes from a tribal community and tribal communities that I are at. Conflict

with the tribal communities around us, and maybe we will have some chance to, visit that, that, topic as well.

Tim Koller: Yeah. That's wonderful. as an individual who has not grown up in a tribal community and hasn't had the experience working with NGOs that you've had, I'm really curious that as you've had this career trajectory and now you're working with students, here in Denver, Colorado, all the life experience you've had, I'm really curious why then. On the other side of it, would you write about conflict resolution?

M.D. Kinoti: Yeah, very good question, Tim. Why would I write about conflict resolution? There are many, reasons and some of them, I, tried to walk through those in the book, especially in chapter one when I [00:05:00] talk about, I grew up in a conflict situation myself. I was born in a polygamist family, so you know, several mothers, including my mom. and, in those kind of families there is always something that is going wrong. There's always tension. There's always a fight between the siblings or whoever in, or the mothers as well. So that's one. And then my community, the. tribe is bolded by the, on the north side, by the Boran, by the Somali, and by, the Drobo. And growing up I had stories about we are enemies to those tribes. So you can imagine then my socialization is one of. hearing and relating with conflicts directly. And then all, moving on, even from the village and going on to, high school. I go to a different tribal community for high school in, in, into the combat [00:06:00] community. And I, later on, I come to work in that same community and I'm not accepted. I'm not, I am treated very different because I don't belong there.

So these aspects of. Feeling, like you belong, but you don't belong. And then anyways, I come to the United States and finally immigrate here. And the tensions between all the communities here, the white, the black, the Hispanic, and even if it's not live on every, of. From my experiences in every day, there's at least an undercurrent of talks around that. And so it has forced me to go back to what I believe to be the uniting factor. what is it that really can bring true understanding, true relationships to. True community and ways of thinking that sees the other not as different or being from a different tribal community, but being of the same, relationship. And that relationship is [00:07:00] really through Christ. and God, if, people don't have a faith.

Tim Koller: That's really fascinating. You start with, and I love the graphics. One of the things that was so helpful in this book was being able to have visual aids as you're making your argument for how conflict resolution works. So one of the things that was a graphic was this escalation of conflict that begins in difference and then it begins to go out and ultimately could culminate in things like violence. And I found it to be really helpful because. Even just as I coach soccer teams or sports teams, there's conflict on the team about who did the right thing, who didn't do the thing that we wanted them to do. and players can get distracted from the ultimate goal of what the team is there to accomplish because they are feuding with one another. And sometimes it begins with just different play styles. But I was fascinated that what you've presented here, I can go and take and work with a youth sports team. It helps me to frame in my mind what [00:08:00] is going on the field, but it also has the ability for us to make sense of what's going on between nation states. It was so helpful to see those things and you give some really great information. I, before we started recording, I made comment of, oh, I have never heard of this inventory before. So the Thomas Kilman inventory, you're. You're familiar with it and you use it throughout the text and for me, I'd never heard of it before, but it was really helpful. So your PhD in Peace building clearly shows up in this text. So you name the book Making Peace with Fire you give some examples of why you chose that. 'cause you help us understand a little bit about how the, PhD in Peace building and the title of this book are being woven together to help us make sense of conflict.

M.D. Kinoti: Yeah. Thank you, Tim. as we, as I started to write the material, this was not, the initial, title of the book. I had a different title, but as [00:09:00] we, I started working on this. I think we were in one editorial meeting. With my editor and we was, we're trying to figure out a metaphor that would really resonate across cultures and one that people see as useful. We actually were walking through a team metaphor. I grew up playing soccer myself. I. Football, as we call it, in the other side of the world. and, there, there was some ideas on using team efforts and how teams work together, but it wasn't landing well. it wasn't until we, actually it was my editor who suggested the fire metaphor and she said, you describe fire in one of your, or in, something that I had written. And she said, you, you talk about fire. Could you expand that on that some more? And as we talked about it, it became very clear that this was something we could use as a way to explore this topic. Again, fire is useful. [00:10:00] Very, useful. We all depend on, the one that gives, we depend on it to cook, we depend on it to smell or to burn out, things that we don't want in any kind of material, to purify it and to make it even better. But fire left unattended and left in an environment that, it's fed with, it has fuel to go to grow from it all, ban and destroy.

And we've seen that. we live in Colorado, we are quite familiar with forest fires we, know what fire can do when it's not attended and it's not controlled. I. It's the same with conflict. Conflict is a normal part of life. It's just like fire. It's here with us. When we control it, well, it can warm our houses, it can help us feed ourselves. Conflict can help us grow. It can help us clarify goals. It can help us, e even strengthen our relationships, [00:11:00] but if we do not attend to it. we've seen it all too often where it all destroy people. A team you just mentioned, your, football team. If the perceptions I have about another player that he's not pulling his weight or is not doing well, or something that is happening with them, I don't like them because of their personality. If I don't control that, it can end up destroying, not just myself and the relationship with that other player. It can also destroy our team effort. And so it's this idea of working within a controlled environment that we recognize the power of and then use it to once, enabling the kind of things we are trying to develop. And that's how, that's where this came from. Now, it's something you mentioned about this book coming out of, peace studies and a PhD process.

this, the biggest difficulty at hand about developing this material was [00:12:00] trying to distill that into common folk language. Like my, I'm a common folk as well. It was really trying to bring it down to the level that is not. doctoral speak, it's not academic speak. and that's why I utilize a lot of stories. And that's where the metaphor also became very strong as a way to build, this, dialogue through the material. And so what you are author, anybody who is gonna, write something, Is gonna find out is you have some ideas that you're coming with, you have all this material that you might be studying and researching, but really distilling it to a way that can communicate to an audience, a general, especially a general audience. It's quite a, it's quite a task and I'm very grateful to have hand and, An auditor and reviewers who kept my me honest on that journey to say, no, this [00:13:00] material, now you're going on this aspect, you're going academic and we don't want that. Even the Tom and Cuman assessment that you mentioned, it say online and folks can take an assessment online, you and, see some of that. They helped me to keep it as simple as possible so it doesn't become an academic text.

Tim Koller: And it is very accessible. But it doesn't sacrifice the good foundations that it's built upon, and I really appreciate that because as someone enjoys reading, I've really enjoyed going through it and engaging the stories. It got me thinking there are these little reflections reactions within the book where you get to respond to some of the questions, and I found those to be incredibly helpful as well. And you make comment of things that you could spend many hours. Digging into, but you just make comment of like how we behave in relationships and particularly in the face of conflict depends largely on habits learned in our development and our upbringing. [00:14:00] So in the book,

you're helping us to recognize that we've been formed and shaped through our experiences, but you don't go into great detail about attachment theory or some of the things that you probably could have spent a long time in. But I found it to be helpful to make reference to it. And giving us some kind of pointers toward, if you wanna go further down that rabbit trail, you can do so, but you just are building a really good argument. But I found one of the more compelling parts of this book is you weave scripture and theology throughout the entirety of this book. You are constantly bringing stories from scripture into the forefront of your argument so that it's not just, here is the theory behind this, but here's what. Biblical and theological inquiry will reveal to us when we get curious about our formation and how conflict is influencing us and our families and our societies. So you really were intentional about bringing that to the forefront.

M.D. Kinoti: I [00:15:00] wrote this book from a biblical Christian perspective. That's the grounding. I, could have written a textbook. I'm actually working on a textbook. I, could have written it from any different angles. This material was primarily Christian and that's where I wanted it to come from, but I also did not want to dissociate it from reality, so therefore I grounded it in my African. Kenyan perspective as an African, and that's this, those two things are, important as somebody reads this book and as they look at it, it's accessible to anyone, not just the Christians, and it's not accessible to more than Africans. They can, anybody can read it as you said. you enjoyed it. But I wanted to be clear that I really was trying to make a case from the biblical perspective and to build that on. The other aspect to that is I came from it, [00:16:00] to it from the perspective that the Bible explores relationships. It's a very relational book. I did not expect the, the more I started to study the idea of relationship in the Bible, the more I saw how God is a very relational God and it from the beginning of time, from Genesis all the way to the end of time, it's a relationship that under guards everything that God does, and of course from a loving relationship and therefore even as he creates us as human beings is creating us to, expand on that and to live through that.

To live from a loving, caring, kind position into relationships with others. And so using that as, a, as the rails that I'm walking, I'm going through, it really opened up the material in a way that I was excited [00:17:00] about because then I have to start thinking about how have I been taught to relate with people. And that comes all the way from my broken family relationships, as a young boy. It also grows out of that into my, adulthood and how, the kind of habits I've en I have inhabited and I've taken on as a way to, relate with other people or not relate with them. and therefore it's, some of it is challenging those kind of things that I was taught and I was, en cultured in and I was encouraged in. It also is helping me to go back to the scriptures and say, but what does the scriptures say? How do I see the other person? What do I consider them to be? C Lewis says, you've never met a moral man, you've never met any ordinary human being that everybody has created in the image of God.

And of course we see that in the scriptures, but how do I use that? How do I relate [00:18:00] with that in my day-to-day living? How do I relate with that, with my kids, with my wife, with, and people around my community, and especially people who I will get into. troubles with conflicts, with indifferences, with, it's not our differences as such. It's just, it's also part of how do I see them and at this moment when we are engaged, engaging in this difficult and, issue. What are I thinking about them and how can I, and how can I still hear the Holy Spirit saying this is a child of God.

Tim Koller: Amen. It's so good and I love you are constantly in the text. Bringing us back to values and purpose. You're helping us to create some reflective space between us and the conflict and to not make it about that person in terms of like you are the problem, but instead to recognize that there is a problem and we. We can [00:19:00] value one another, we can honor one another. We can work on solving the problem together. So instead of it being us versus them, here's the problem. Can

we work together to do this? What are the values and what is my purpose in this? And you draw heavily from Romans chapter 12, and you are highlighting in this that do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. And you make a very bold argument. You say that. Assume that the relationship depends entirely on you, your attitudes, comments, actions, and way of doing things all impact the future of any relationship you are part of. Take the perspective that says, I want this to work. I want to fight for this relationship. This means that instead of walking away so quickly when there is a disappointment, seek ways to restore the relationship, keep it going. Transform it the most significant mental shift and do all that you can to live in peace. Might be realizing that we can change ourselves, [00:20:00] not others. You're putting a lot of responsibility on us.

M.D. Kinoti: and the Bible does the, I mean, it, doesn't, the Bible does not give us room to walk away and blame other people. I mean, look at, look at Adam and Eve. God does not just allow Adam to walk away and say, oh, it has to be achieve. Alright. You are safe. I'm gonna, or King Abel, or any other character in the scriptures. Even Jesus himself doesn't really let someone like Nima out of the hook. He, it all comes back to the personal and to me, and it's, unfortunate that our society teaches us that we can easily blame other people. And walk away from any, responsibility if I can place enough blame on you, in this context, I am free. I am, I can [00:21:00] walk away and say, I'm not saying there isn't abuse. And we address the issue abuse in the scriptures in the, book.

Tim Koller: Yep.

M.D. Kinoti: I'm not saying there's no abuse and there is, but it's that aspect of you see it. Another thread you see in the Bible very clearly is the fact that. We, I am responsible and I'm responsible for my thinking. I'm responsible for my perspectives. I'm responsible for how I see you, how I treat you, and I'm responsible when things are not going right to find the space if possible, to come back to this.

Now, you mentioned the idea of dissociating, the issue from the person. And this is something that I learned from my wonderful professor Glen Stassen, who's written materials on books around just. Peace, war and Peace Theory. Grand is, unfortunately passed on, a few years ago, but he was a tremendous, wonderful person in helping us realize from a pastoral [00:22:00] perspective that even as you cancel people, you have to help them see their role in the conflict. They can't just walk away. Another person mention is, His Dr. Hossberger who has written materials on cross-cultural conflicts as well also passed on last year. But these were my professors and my mentors in helping me to realize it's so easy to push the things away from who I am and to see, to start to think that I am perfect. Of course, I am perfect. That's how we are trained to think. but to come back to the honesty of being, of realizing. I am a, I am the sinner here, and what can I do about this issue? Now, if I can do a real self-reflection and realize I actually have nothing to do with this, then I'm also able to engage the other person to address the issue well enough, whether or not I'm the guilty one. [00:23:00] But, first of all, they has to start with me.

Tim Koller: I love that. I mean, one of the things I trained my soccer team in actually was we had them go through seven habits of highly effective people, and the first habit is be proactive. Take responsibility for your own action. And I love that you're inviting us into this self-reflective space where we can take responsibility for these things. But I also had to chuckle, one of the headings that you had in your book early on is the ABCs of how to get into conflict. With almost anyone and I had a chuckle on this 'cause I reading through the headings of this going, ah, yes, a argumentative b blaming. C character attacks, D disrespect, e evading. And I was like, yeah, I could start an argument with anyone just going through these ABCs like that is such a helpful frame to go. Yeah, I can see this show up on my soccer team. I can see this on social media constantly. I can see this in interpersonal

conflicts and intimate relationships like this shows up. All [00:24:00] over the place, and at the end of the chapter, you then reframe it for us to say, here's how you can get out of conflict. And it's a reframing of those ABCs. So just the practical nature of what you're providing to us and woven together with the scriptures I have found to be such an encouraging book and such a helpful book.

So I've. I've tremendously enjoyed this, and I will say as I was going through, I was like, okay, I'm taking responsibility. I can see how I'm contributing to conflict. I need to take responsibility. And when you get to the chapter on abuse, I found that to be, I. So very helpful because there are these situations in which we need to do the assessment, and you tell a very compelling story of an individual who had been a government worker and the relationship they get into with a pastor and the way in which they relate to one another. And you, after you read through it, you ask the question, is this abuse? And I had to pause and, really weigh [00:25:00] on the questions that you present to say what parts of this. abuse, what parts of this is there, this culpability, and how do we get out of such a messy and complex situation? So you're bringing really good case studies and causing, at least me as I'm reading it, to reflect and think, yeah, how do you address this? So why did you include a chapter on abuse as you were going through your argument here?

M.D. Kinoti: Well, because sometimes those two things get confused a great deal. especially when we're dealing with power. you can get into conflicts if you and I were in conflicts because, we are colleagues and we're working in the same office. You don't have any, supervisory role over me that's easier to handle and it's easy to come to the table easily and for me to call you out, Tim. Amen. This, doesn't sound right. Easy to handle that, but, in some cases where power, [00:26:00] differences, profound and, in this case, I'm thinking. Bosses. I'm thinking sometimes even gender differences. there can be real abuse and we know that. I, saw that in my community as I grew up, especially if women were, disproportionately abused by their husbands or by men in the society. It's not easy to say just because we are in a conflict that we shouldn't consider the role that power plays in that environment. I don't think we can talk about how to build peace and how to resolve conflicts without considering power. I mean, that could also be power differentiate. I've seen that in, in some places where this is carried out in a way that the, power that I carry, I can misuse it. To abuse other people. And therefore, that person needs to be aware that, especially when we are [00:27:00] in those roles, we need to be able to say, this is not conflict anymore. Yes, it's a conflict, but it, is really, truly abusive and be able to walk away from those situations if we can. one of the things that I have discovered after the material was published or the book of published was this scripture in, in the book of Hebrews, Hebrews 12:14, strive for Peace with everyone I. For the Holiness without which no one will see the Lord. And I thought it's very closely related. It's actually very closely related to the, the vast that I used in the book, in from Romans, I like this one even more because it has that balance between the idea of peace. And righteousness or holiness. We know things that as Christians, we know we shouldn't be walking towards. And this connection between our relationships with other people living at peace and [00:28:00] holiness, it, almost hacks back to what Jesus is talking about. Love the Lord and love your neighbor. And that's why I've really loved this passage we've. We, as I've discovered it over, after the book was published,

Tim Koller: That's powerful. Thanks for sharing that passage. It's also fun that someone who has written such a great book is still learning and exploring in this area. That gives all of us hope that as we are going through things we can continue to learn and grow. And you actually end your book talking about celebrating the success of repaired relationships. Seminary, one of our core commitments is that of redemptive relationships. So I find a significant overlap between celebrating repaired relationships and our way of articulating redemptive relationships. But you end the book thinking about growth after fire, and earlier in the book you make the reference of, farming. As a farmer, the hard work that goes into preparing the [00:29:00] soil and making sure that you

understand each of the things that you're seeking to cultivate its growth. So could you help us understand how you see the analogy, the metaphor of farming and this idea of growth after fire?

M.D. Kinoti: Yeah, well those of us who are listening to this or watching this, and you are not a farmer, let me give you just the basics of farming. One is you identify the ground, you till the ground. I. You put the seeds in, there's always, there is always going to be some weeds that come up and so you have to pull the weeds or depending on what the crop is, if, you use sprays that will kill the weeds. But, also in some communities, in some places, what they will do is actually, what they call slash and ban. It's not recommended, not, the best way to, prepare your grounds, which you ban the whole grounds, especially where they don't have mechanized farming. Once you, once there's a [00:30:00] fire that goes through any kind of ground and bans all the, whatever the vegetation is there, there's always a growth that comes after that. there's science around it. So there's a lot of people who will look at that and say, well, there must have been sinks in the ground, and they were not banned. The growth that comes out of that is quite significant in most places, and you see that even in our mountain here when. When you look at where there was a fire a few years ago, you might see the charred trees that are still standing out there, but a lot of undergrowth that starts to come up. What my thinking was around this was, if we have, sometimes when we have some intense. Conflicts. I'm not talking about violence. because violence obviously is another level and that can destroy, I'm talking about when we have some engagement with someone else that helps us to clarify where we are.

That often what I have found, [00:31:00] especially in my own life, is that helps me to. To grow in some way. I get to understand that person differently. I get to see our relationship in a different way. I get to appreciate them bringing up the issues up and, often it does help me to, and it might even help both of us or all of us who are involved in that environment to grow in a different way. So this is what I'm trying to relate this to farming. Of course, I'm also thinking. That it takes time to nurture a garden. It takes time to nurture any kind of growth. So even after the. You have all this, new growth that comes up that also needs to be nurtured again. And it needs to be to the same way you want to nurture the garden in the first place. You have to nurture this new growth again to make it, viable and to make it to grow again. But that's the case. That's really the case with our relationships because our [00:32:00] relationships, they can be destroyed by very small things. I mean, I'm, sure there are folks who are listening to this or watching this and saying, yeah, I, I still don't even understand why we don't talk anymore. I. because the issue was not that deep or the, or I walked away so quickly. And it can be that small, but it can also be huge. The, issue is to, when we have the opportunity, when we have the ability to, and we come back, whether we celebrate it as director, as I say we do or not, but the growth that comes after that, we have to remember, we need to nurture that as well.

Tim Koller: It's so beautiful and I love the metaphor. It's very helpful for me as someone who appreciates gardening, never been wildly successful at it, but has appreciates the work that goes into it. Yeah. Metaphor to be really helpful because when I would allow my garden to go untended, I. It would get overrun [00:33:00] with weeds and it would start to take life away from the plants that I actually wanted to grow. And the longer I didn't tend to it, the more difficult it became then. And so part of my reality is to think through the relationships that I have and to consider. I. How am I tending to the quality of these relationships? And you've given some really helpful information for those of us that begin to recognize that there are these ruptures in our relationships. How can we go about doing the work of repairing those ruptures and how can we actually begin to operate in a way that prevents ruptures from happening in the first place. So I've really appreciated the work that you've done here in the book, making Peace With Fire. And so, Dr. Kinoti, before we close out, I'm

curious, are there any things that I've not asked you that you would like for us to talk about for the Denver Seminary audience to hear?

M.D. Kinoti: I think it's the, is a challenge for us to engage peace building and peacemaking. I. [00:34:00] A lot more from our faith than we have typically done. I've, and this is not casting a blame on Christians. I'm one of them. I'm just saying that our material, our scriptures, our God is a peace. Making God is a relationship, God and the book that he's given us, the Bible, the His message to us is grounded in that. I find that we actually have a lot more that we can use in this direction to build better relationships. even with people that at this point we might differ on other issues, on ideologies, on politics and other things, there is a lot that is contained in the scriptures that gives us direction on what to do and, what to say. Then the second thing I would like to emphasize is really trying to write more on this topic [00:35:00] from our perspectives. You'll be surprised. I mean, I did a whole lot of study around this trying to figure out what do other communities say. I mean, you see the Mennonites, you see the Anna Baptist and their writings, but what do the Methodist and the Baptist and the Catholics say on this topic? And there, there are some writings, but not near enough. I think we can, from our religious and Christian backgrounds as well, I think we should encourage more writings around peace and peace building and conflict resolution. Similarly, we are in networks with people from other faiths and religions, Judaism, Muslim, and others. And I would say let's encourage more people to write in these areas from their perspectives, because I think we don't have an overwhelming amount of material that we can use to build peace within our families, within our communities, and in our even internationally. I.

Tim Koller: That's a beautiful word.

M.D. Kinoti: [00:36:00] We might think we do just because, I don't know why we think we do, but it's actually not near enough. And, actually if you go further on and say, if I, were to engage a Muslim friend right now and say, what does your scriptures teach about peace building, conflict resolution and such. Or if, someone were to approach me and say, what does the Bible really teach you about, conflict resolution. I would have to be hunting for scriptures here and there. But there is a real coherent message in the scriptures, in the Bible anyways that teaches about relationship and relationship building, but with God and with other people. And it's quite profound to me.

Tim Koller: Absolutely.

M.D. Kinoti: Yeah.

Tim Koller: could not agree more. And I appreciate that you're encouraging us to think through these lenses and you've done the work of paving a way for us. So I wanna encourage our readers to pick up a copy of Making Peace With Fire by Dr. Kinoti [00:37:00] And if you are compelled by this and you want to have the opportunity to do so, you can come study at Denver Seminary under the tutelage of Dr. Kinoti So. Thank you for making time to be here on the conversation at Engage 360

M.D. Kinoti: This was great. Thank you, Tim. I.

Tim Koller: Friends. Thanks for choosing to spend some time with us. We're grateful for your interests, support, and prayers. Until next time, may the Lord bless you.