

## Engage360 | Episode 49: Mentoring and Ministering to Incarcerated Youth

- Introduction: Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Welcome back to Engage360 from Denver Seminary. I'm your host, Don Payne. And we are delighted that you're with us because this is episode one of season two, and we are really grateful, especially to all of you who have helped make season one a success by listening to Engage360 and everybody behind the scenes who's had a hand in the production of this podcast, grateful for that. We ended last week, we ended season one last week with a conversation on cultural engagement with our colleague and friend Patty Pell. And this week we're really excited to kick off season two with a practical. And what I think is going to be an inspiring and encouraging example of cultural engagement we have with us as our guest, Chris Rose, who is a recent MDiv grad from Denver Seminary. I believe this past December, welcome to the podcast, Chris.
- Chris Rose: Thanks so much. I had no idea I was going to be the first of a season.
- Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, you are.
- Chris Rose: I'm so honored.
- Dr. Don Payne: This is auspicious. Yeah. This is episode one, season two. And so we're kicking it off with this and kind of kicking off the school year with this episode as well. Chris works with Youth for Christ, YFC and through that is what I'm just going to call a mentor. He can nuance that, but a mentor with youth in the correctional system, the youth juvenile detention system. Is that a fair way to put it?
- Chris Rose: Yeah, absolutely.
- Dr. Don Payne: Other than that, Chris, tell us how you got into this and what it is you do.
- Chris Rose: Yeah, I think first I'm just happy to be able to be on with you guys and always believed that I had a face for radio. So I think this is a perfect opportunity. I, yeah, I worked for Denver area youth for Christ, worked with incarcerated youth as a mentor and transition worker. Sometimes put on the hat of being a chaplain as well. Spiritual guidance and whatever the young people need. I got into this work, however, much more of an accident than an intentionality. So I came out here to Denver Seminary with hopes of pursuing some sort of ministry that would work with youth. A lot of my background growing up was engaging in a number of young people around me that would just share whatever they had on their minds, and difficult trauma that they had. And I listened very well. So decided I was going to use that to go into therapy at first and had this grandiose idea of making a lot of money being a therapist and near the end of my undergrad.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, most therapists I know are really making penny, they're raking it in.

Chris Rose: And so I essentially decided that I was going to go down that route and things had occurred in my life that reoriented myself back to God and my faith, and brought me to a place of just accepting a direction that I had tried to avoid for a very long time. Which was to engage the church in a more meaningful way than I had. So came out to Denver Seminary, put all my eggs in one basket. Like I typically like to test God and fortunate for me, he is gracious in how he treats me. So I was accepted. I came out here, still thought I was going to get working in some sort of church or chaplaincy work, maybe for the government in the sense of military. Cause I knew that I would be able to have some of my loans paid off. Came out here, tried to get a hold of recruiters. Couldn't for the life of me, have recruiters get back to me, which is very rare for anything in the military branch. And so essentially just wrote out my time, trying to find some sort of direction, knew that I was really good at working with young people and others who had been through a lot. So was contemplating maybe going into counseling here was still on the track to get an MDiv.

And essentially at some point I took a youth class that was at risk youth here at Denver Seminary, was able to tour the facility at Lookout Mountain Youth Services, which is up in Golden. It's a maximum security facility that has young people who have sentences anywhere between a year to six years for the rest of their young adult life. And those are young people that also couldn't manage having other placements. So there's a number of facilities around Denver and if they were unable to be successful at those, they would be moved to Lookout Mountain. So I went to Lookout Mountain toward the place with Gareth Unruh, who at the time was working alongside Preston Adams and both were at youth for Christ doing some volunteer work as chaplains, and invested in the young people there. Didn't really feel that much of a call into it. It was interesting. A lot of things that were outside of my comfort zone, but a number of months later, I was looking to be invested in the community in some way, rather than just come and take classes and engage my academics. I wanted to do something practical. So I reach out to Gareth and he essentially said I had two options.

I could work with these youth that I had seen before that were in the justice system, or I could work with foster youth who were in and out of trouble with the law, and would be in placements and also had some issues with their current foster parents. And that was at work with Shiloh House. So I decided to take the opportunity to volunteer with Shiloh House, because I absolutely thought I had nothing to say for incarcerated youth, had no particular leaning and experience in that, didn't understand a number of things. So it was just outside of my comfort zone. Worked for about three years as a volunteer off and on had Gareth as my unofficial mentor. But we would meet every so often have cigars some times and just talk about life. And all the while he was slowly twisting my arm into the idea of working alongside him at Youth for Christ.

Dr. Don Payne: He had an agenda?

Chris Rose:

Perhaps absolutely was not something that I was interested in mostly because it's a space of, you need to figure out your own funding, you know, and there's an entrepreneurial spirit that I was not comfortable with at the time. So thought I was still going to get a job in the church, was just volunteering. And then at a certain point, and this is roughly three, three and a half years ago, I had another crisis of faith and identity where I needed to figure out what I was going to do. And it was getting close to the time that I was going to finish my MDiv. And I had Shiloh House actually reach out to me and give me a possible position, working in more of a social work field. And it's not necessarily religious in nature, but they all knew that I was going for an MDiv. And a lot of the staff just loved me and how I worked with the young people. So I said, give me some time, I'm going to think on this, I'm going to pray on it. I spent about a week talking to a number of individuals at Shiloh House that I knew as well as some young people. And they all were really excited to have me. And so about a week later, I decided to say, Hey, I would love this position if I could. And unfortunately they had given it away in that week's time.

And it was another shut door on me that I had no idea why God would uproot everything that I thought I was going to do. I thought I was going to work in a church that got thrown out the window because I felt this call to do some sort of work in social work and work with these traumatized youth in an impactful way that was outside of the normal church wall type setting. So like I do, I had a little pity party for that summer and didn't really want to talk to God, didn't understand why he would change my desire and then have that door shut on me. So near the end of that summer, I took a really long hike out in the mountains and communed with God for the entire time, felt this peace of mind that I was exactly where I needed to be. And later that month talked with Gareth again and let him know kind of what happened. And he had this opportunity where essentially it would be kind of a Guinea pig situation.

The needs for Youth for Christ within facilities of incarcerated youth had shifted a little bit where they needed a chaplain to step in at Lookout, this very same place that I had been before, but they also needed someone to step into the role with contracts, with the State to do mentoring and transition work. And how that works basically, is under the umbrella of another organization. We are able to contract out through parole officers and government districts to provide services such as mentoring, transition work and therapy. This would be a source of some of the income that we could raise for the work in the facility. And we would also step into the role of volunteer coordinating. So, I having everything that I thought I was going to do thrown out the window, I had nothing to lose and everything to gain by just stepping into faith. And I took on that role and I knew nothing about it and just thrown into the space and had to figure it out on the fly. And I nearly immediately fell in love with the kids that I was with.

Dr. Don Payne:

What do you love most about it?

Chris Rose:

The stories, I think the individual stories of the young people that I work with, when I'm able to form a relationship with them, that's lasting and meaningful,

and they have the trust in who I am to share their story. I feel like I am brought into it and I become part of it. And it becomes this beautiful amalgam of my story and their story intermixing, as well as God's story in both of our lives.

Dr. Don Payne: You mentioned when we spoke a few days ago that this really does address some of the problem of recidivism once these kids are released.

Chris Rose: Yeah. There's research founded at a number of mentoring institutions and we ourselves do some assessments based on how they view themselves in various assets. There's a assessment tool called 40 Assets, which essentially gives a slight predictor of a individual success based on how many of these assets they've got. And then it's everything from material resources to how the neighborhood around them was, to how many adults that were caring that was in their lives and engagement with their parents and family, etcetera, and a good number of our young people do not have a lot of those same assets that others have been privileged with. And the more that we can surround these young people and provide some of those assets as well as meaningful relationships with adults that just unconditionally care for them, the better we set them up for success. And so there is evidence that a solid mentoring relationship can help produce results that reduces recidivism.

Dr. Don Payne: You also, I think have a pretty uncanny gift for maybe being safe with these kids, and loving this population. And I mean, is that, I hate to put this in purely human terms, but just for the sake of this conversation, is that, what is that where the magic is? Is that what really makes this thing click or in more theological terms? What is it that God really uses so powerfully in you, through you, in these kids' lives?

Chris Rose: Yeah, I think it was a combination of empathy, bringing to the table, nothing of my own agenda and just desiring to know them. And when you bring that you become a safe space for them to be able to share whatever happened in their life, because they believe that you're not there for a specific reason to try to get them to be anything other than what they are, that you are somebody that loves them as they are. And in that space, they develop the trust to be able to share different elements of their life, that they may not be up front with even their therapist that they work with in the facilities. So I've been able to touch base on a lot of family issues and a lot of internal struggles with some of these young men that when I asked them if they've talked to their therapist about it, they've been hesitant and they just don't have that same level of trust, whether it's because it's somebody from the system or because specifically I am a space that they know will love them, no matter what their answer is. And I guess if we apply some theological terms to that, essentially it for me is incarnating love the way that I understand it to be that regardless of whoever I am, I am loved and God is willing to sit with me in any mess that I make of myself. And so if can incarnate that and show that in a physical manifestation with my own relationship with these young people, then I believe that they feel this connection that represents the kingdom of God in a way that they haven't before.

Dr. Don Payne: You mentioned to me previously that a lot of what you experienced in this ministry is a sort of microcosm that's been going on for a long time of things we're seeing explode in our culture at large, that in some ways what you're dealing with, let me put it this way. And in many respects, what we see going on it's tearing our society apart in some respects is what you've been dealing with all along, nothing new.

Chris Rose: Yeah. Essentially for the last couple of years, two and a half, I think when I've been working with these young people, the stories that I've heard from them are, again, just very related to what we see in the country exploding right now. And I think part of that is because, and this is my own reflection on it. We now are in a space amidst, a lot of shutdowns and a lot of unsure spaces and everything that we used to be able to turn to for distractions are removed and there's a welling up of desire for change. And so right in front of our face, we now cannot deny a lot of feelings of oppression and unhappiness and tragic stories of systems being set up against individuals. And what I've experienced and how this relates is essentially I had to, when I first started working here and it was a bit of a process, understand my own position of privilege in a sense of, for me to understand where a lot of these young people came from to make the choices that they did. I have to remove myself from my own story and just experience theirs.

And just to just see how the world around them has impacted them and approach that with empathy. So there's a lot of listening and I think as a whole, the country and a number of churches right now need to have that posture of humility just to listen, to understand that someone else's story is not their own and perhaps decisions that have been made, where we brought our own preconceived notions into the scenario. We have to understand where the other comes from, where our neighbor comes from. So as I've been reflecting on the space that I feel the local church needs to step up, and in a number of regards. And there's a lot of churches that are doing really great job, but I think we have a unique perspective as Christians approaching these times and understanding and speaking into what a God who loves the oppressed looks like. I see throughout human history, God favoring, those that have been oppressed. He specifically chose to call out an enslaved group. He moved within his own kingdom to speak out against taking advantage of others and the disenfranchisement of a number of people through Christ.

You see him speaking out against those in positions of power that abuse it. And we also see that as Christianity began, we were born in a space of being the oppressed other. And so we have a unique perspective to be able to empathize with that, and ought to be able to do that. And for a long time, especially here in America for a number of churches, I think there has been a complacency found in the positions of power that they've had. They've had a lot of privileges to be able to exercise their faith in the way that they wanted to, to grow as a movement, to have say in politics. And that has enabled a space where I don't know if it's forgetting, but a lack of empathy in some regards to those who have not quite arrived in that same space. And so I think when I bring a number of

stories from my young people to the table and I demonstrate a lot of their love and desire to be better men, cause I've worked mostly with young men. There's a lot of surprising reactions from people in the church who had a lot of these preconceived notions of what it looks like to be a criminal and what it looks like to be a bad kid.

And it's about rewriting that narrative and understanding that they're, these are young people that made really terrible decisions sometimes, but they were coming from a place where a lot of what we have as privileged, was not afforded to them. And I myself have been in a number of situations where I've heard stories from them where I would reflect on myself and say, Hey, if I had that same kind of thing happened to me, if I was traumatized in the same way, or I had the same neighborhood that I grew up in and I didn't have the relationships that I did now, I very well could have ended up on that same route.

Dr. Don Payne: I'm sure you would haven't done any differently.

Chris Rose: Yeah, that's correct.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. That's kind of sobering to realize. Do you have a good story at hand?

Chris Rose: Yeah. I have one of my favorites is I had a young man, went up to Greeley after he was set out of Lookout to go on parole. That was initially where he was and he was in the foster system for a really long time and had a number of cases against him, which made it very difficult for him to get any sort of housing. And he had kind of a surrogate father figure in his life who wanted to adopt him and they were moving in that direction. But the housing fell through the relationship with this surrogate father figure fell through. And I was one of the very few stable relationships that he still had. And he had a huge drug addiction problem as well, and a lot of aggravated assault and robbery. And he went up to Greeley and initially had a place to live for a couple of months, but trying to manage, getting two jobs, as well as be completely on his own. And a lot of the internal struggle of being 19 and having no real close family bonds and direction in your life, led them to a space of deciding it would be easier for him to just be homeless for awhile. So that was difficult for me only because I wanted him safe. And I knew that there was a lot of drugs on the street and everything else, but I would regularly every couple of weeks ago and I'd meet with him and we'd have lunch and we'd talk about how life was. And I was still on his team and I would advocate for him with the rest of the team. And I remember one time he was just really excited and you want to show me where he lived.

And so he took me down underneath one of the bridges, and this is more closely to the Loveland area, and showed me kind of his stomping grounds. And told me a lot of stories of conversations that he was having with other homeless people there and had a backpack that he was wrapping needles in and packaging them in such a way that he could dispose of them later. And I was worried for his safety obviously. And I was like, Hey man, like these are not super great things to be picking up, but he explained he was doing that so that

the other homeless people there that were not as coordinated, wouldn't accidentally prick themselves. And he was trying to clean up the space for them. And so I saw in that moment, this expression of just genuine love for the other, that impacted me in a way that I hadn't seen in a, of people in my life. He has basically nothing and was very uncomfortable with the idea of faith in my God understood that I continued to pour into his life because I valued him because I believed God valued him. But he was still very removed from, from the idea of, of there being this loving God. But he expressed this unconditional love in a way that I knew was reflective of the image of God.

Dr. Don Payne: Interesting. Yeah. What a fascinating story, what continues to both motivate you and challenge you in this work?

Chris Rose: For me, and this relates mostly to the amount of self growth that I've found in this work as well, is the space of understanding how adored we really are by our God. That's both challenging and life giving. So I can see the image of God in these young people who most of society would not assume that you could see and through their stories or through, I had another young man who completely radically changed his viewpoint on life. Once he had a daughter and wanted to be the best father that he could and was trying to understand what fatherhood looks like and this understanding that regardless of what we do in our behaviors, there's this adoration by our God. It grew me as a person still continues to challenge me when I have a lot of self pitying moments, but I see this overwhelming love of them, the young people I work with as well as myself in this work. And it continues to be something daily that is both rewarding and a wrestling moment, because there's so many narratives that we have written inside of ourselves about how we are this disgusting creature here on earth. And we are lucky that God decided to choose us and had he not, which was within his right. We would suffer the consequences that we are due. And I completely understand that.

Dr. Don Payne: All Technically true.

Chris Rose: All technically true. I completely understand that perspective when we forget the other side of that, that he chose us because he loves us, because he adores us .

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah love precedes and drives all that. It's not a yes, but okay. I guess I'll love you.

Chris Rose: Absolutely. It's once I understand that, then I know not that I can get away with whatever I do, but that regardless of where I'm at, I am loved in a way that no other creature ever could be. This is this unique perspective of humanity that uplifts us as well as yes, we are aware of our position, our lowly position, but we are also aware that God didn't have to choose. He did so out of his desire to, so he desires me and he desires those young people. He longs for those young people.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, you're speaking to a distinction I often like to make, which is the difference between being worthy and to being deserving. And when those are confused, that can merely pulverize people because to say, we're not deserving of God's love God's grace God's forgiveness is, is one thing in which I think is theologically true to say, but to assume that to be undeserving is the same thing as to be unworthy. That's a dangerous misstep because while we are undeserving or utterly worthy, because God has deemed us worthy by investor, by creating us in God's own image, and deeming us worthy of God's own love and God's redemption.

Chris Rose: Yeah. And I feel to reiterate on that. Something that I've been reflecting on is when we're in a space of denying just how utterly adored we are or that even the other people in our lives are, regardless of whatever they do. It's almost coming from this place of pride to tell God what he shouldn't have done. You knew we were undeserving. I don't understand how you could do this, but to release all of that pride and to come to a place of saying, I don't understand it, but God, you deemed us where the, you deemed us as something to be loved. So I'm just going to take your word for it, you know, so that is essentially another piece that needs to be emphasized more in a number of churches, I think.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Yeah. Leave us with maybe a couple of really specific takeaways or maybe practical suggestions or the things you think most people need to grasp about this population or ministry to this population.

Chris Rose: Yeah. It's understanding that regardless of decisions that they've made and some can be horrendous. And so it does take a specific type of person to work with them. You have to be able to empathize and see past a lot of that, but understanding that they come from spaces and stories that many of us can't relate to. But if we listen, we can empathize with and understand where they got to where they were. That they are people again, worth investing in, that we oftentimes working with them, get more out of the work than necessarily they do. We are able to reflect more on how we are loved and love through our relationship. Feel Christ's love for both of us and understanding too, that there are a number of organizations. And for right now I'm working with Denbury Youth for Christ and working with this population. But my heart is always, regardless of wherever I'm at, I'm going to be working with this population because I fell in love with them.

And knowing that there is this holistic need, I think that's a big takeaway. It's very easy to spiritualize everything in the sense of, Hey, if they only understood Christ, then everything would be fixed. But understanding that we are holistic beings. And so a lot of these young people before they can even address where their faith is at, they need to feel in a safe and trusting relationship. They need to be able to have their needs provided for, they need to have their worth spoken into and rewriting a lot of those narratives that they've gotten their head about who they are. And that's something any of us can do with young people, even young people in our churches who seem to be difficult or break a

number of rules and are the ones that are easier to kind of sweep under the rug and move on from. Oftentimes what they just need is somebody to pour into their life, to see them, to love them unconditionally. And to understand that there's a lot of needs besides just understanding the gospel and the Gospel is this holistic thing. That's that radically changes everything in our life.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, but doesn't that actually validate what we say about the Gospel?

Chris Rose: Absolutely.

Dr. Don Payne: Brings those sometimes abstractions, those abstract theological terms into a very rather palpable reality. It makes the gospel believable.

Chris Rose: And something worth spreading and believing in and moving towards the kingdom.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. Well, Chris, let me express on behalf of the seminary, we're really proud of you. Proud of what you're doing, proud of how you've drawn upon your theological education in this ministry. And couldn't be more excited about that. Thanks for sharing your story with us.

Chris Rose: Of course. Thanks for having me on.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah. We've been talking to Chris Rose involved with Denbury Youth for Christ and the Lookout Mountain detention facilities. This has been Engage 360 from Denver Seminary, episode 1. We're really grateful for you. Hope you'll take a moment now and then to give us a rating or a review. I'm Don Payne. Thanks for joining us. We'll talk to you again next week.