

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 85 | Loving Our Neighbors, Part 5: Foster Care & Families In Crisis

Featuring: Autumn Gardner, Becky Braman, and Jen Shepard



Autumn: Welcome to the Vision for Life podcast, an ongoing conversation between the pastors of Fellowship Denver and the Church at large. Each week we talk about life, faith, the Bible, and how to follow Jesus as we go about our daily lives. I'm Autumn, host of the podcast, and today Becky Braman and Jen Shepard, two friends and members of Fellowship Denver are joining me. Becky, Jen—welcome. I'm so glad that you agreed to spend some time with me here today.

Becky: Thanks for having us.

Autumn: This conversation that we're going to have today is specifically about foster care and then an organization that Fellowship Denver partners with called Safe Families. And this is one of a series of conversations that we're having on the podcast in which we're asking, what does it mean to actively love our neighbors? And, in Jesus's conception of the Old Testament law, He said love of God and love of neighbor are the fulfillment of the law. He also made it distinctly clear that this love of neighbor is active and isn't boundaried by the ways that we often assess whether someone is deserving of our help or not. And He also, in that—in His teaching in the law and the New Testament—mentioned repeatedly different groups of vulnerable individuals. We see that as a repeated theme throughout the New Testament as well, in the Church; He mentioned widows, orphans, and the poor as people who we should actively—we the church, the followers of Jesus—should actively love and support. And so, we're asking that question in this series of conversations, what does that love of neighbor look like in our modern context in Denver? Then we also hope to encourage our listeners and our Fellowship Denver family to ask, who are the vulnerable people around us? who are our neighbors in need and in pain? and what does it look like to respond to those needs? And then, ultimately, the engaging in this work often looks like bringing our relational presence of the people of God and the family of God to these spaces where we meet vulnerable individuals and welcome them in and offer ourselves and our resources to them as a way to directly meet those needs.

So, first I'm wondering if you would just share with our listeners a little bit about yourselves. I asked the two of you to join me on the podcast because you're directly involved in this work in foster care and in Safe Families, and so I would love for you to just introduce yourself first and share a little bit about yourselves with us.

Becky: Hey, this is Becky, and my family and I have been coming to Fellowship for about three years. We have five forever kiddos and one foster baby in our house right now. We've been foster parents for five years and have been involved in Safe Families for nearly one year.

Jen: This is Jen and my husband and I have been at Fellowship Denver forever—for a really long time—for a really long time—we were foster parents maybe about 10 years ago, to a teenager, 15 going on 16, and then most recently we've done foster care for two young boys who we ended up adopting in 2019 out of foster care.

Autumn: And all of your kiddos, your families, are also a part of our Fellowship Denver family. So, when you talk about these kids, Becky, you said your "forever family," and then the boys who you've adopted, they're a part of our Fellowship Denver family, our ministries., they participate in kids ministry and student Fellowship, and they are there fully integrated all over that church.

Jen: Yeah, all over the church literally running around, literally.

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Autumn: What led each of you—you can just answer this in whatever order here—what led each of you to decide to invest in foster care? So, what compelled you initially to get involved in foster care?

Becky: This is Becky. Our family, Joel and I, were looking for a way that we could love children and that we could serve neighbors as an entire family and as part of just our daily walk as opposed to an event that we did separately. And, just kind of briefly, it's been really beautiful to see our kids welcome other children without any questions or judgment and just see them really welcome kids into our home with open arms.

Autumn: You were asking how it could be integrated, how this way to love neighbors and serve others could really be integrated into your day-to-day lives and that you could do as a whole family.

Becky: Yes.

Jen: This is Jen, and I think for me personally I've always felt, gosh, maybe since high school, just a deep need, desire, calling, whatever you will, to provide a home for kids who need one, ever since I can remember. And so, I've been involved in some aspect of foster care since high school throughout college, and then after college as well through work and things like that. And then when I met Mark, he said yes, he was interested in foster care, but then I later learned it was just to get the girl. He was like, 'sure, I'll do that.' So then we waited.

Autumn: You cared about it, so he cared about it.

Jen: He wanted to get the girl, so he said yes to foster care. But, you know, a few years later I was like, 'well, I'm not quite sure he's ready yet,' because it really does take a team. And so, we prayed through it and a number of years after we got married, we both decided we would just start taking one step at a time and see where it led, and it led to a house full of boys today. So, that's why we're here.

Autumn: Yeah, and I think it's helpful to note that- what are the ages?

Jen: So, my two biological boys are 10 and 12, and our two adopted boys are 10 and 12—so they're all 10 and 12.

Autumn: Yes, so the way we see them at church everywhere is probably the way your home is too, a lot of activity.

Jen: Yes, very energetic.

Autumn: In these episodes, as I mentioned, we're contemplating this biblical notion of love of neighbor and the story that we've turned to in past episodes in which Jesus talks about this very clearly is the story of the good Samaritan. And so many of the ways in which we see love of neighbor take shape are demonstrated in the way Jesus told the story. The act of the Samaritan was sacrificial. He extended himself and his resources to meet the needs of the person in need, and he stepped over boundaries or disregarded them to help the person who was in need. And so, what parallels do you see in that call to the Church in our modern context to offer that sort of love of neighbor to vulnerable families, particularly people impacted by the foster care system? So, the kids and families who are involved in the foster care system.

Becky: In both foster care and Safe Families, you're loving people that you've never met before in a way that's unlike what most of our culture sees as normal, and then we're using our resources as part of disruptive generosity to wrap

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around families our time and our money, and all of our emotional and relational resources, and we have to do it in order to do it while we need to do it with compassion.

Autumn: In this conversation, I think it's helpful to get a handle on what the actual state of foster care and the need is that is present in our kind of immediate community. So, in Denver, or in Colorado, what are the realities of foster care? How many children are in foster care? And how would you help someone understand just what the reality is of foster care in Colorado and in our local area is right now?

Becky: So, some of the numbers that I have are from 2020, so they may have changed a little bit because there was a recent law that went into effect in October of 2021 that's changing a little bit of how foster care will look, but at that point the median age of a child in foster care in Colorado is seven years old. The highest category of maltreatment by far is neglect which accounts for 83% of cases, and there are around 4,800 children in foster care in Colorado right now.

Jen: Many referrals for foster care are for neglect and substance abuse. I think they accounted for about, did you say, 83% of the cases? and they kind of go hand-in-hand. Most neglect is a result of substance abuse. Not all neglect is substance abuse, but they are highly correlated.

Autumn: And where do referrals primarily come from?

Jen: So, for young children they can come- I mean, babies can be referred from the hospital or the doctor's office. A lot of referrals happen once children reach daycare or school age because then outside adults are seeing kiddos and can get a little bit of insight into what they may be experiencing at home.

Autumn: And what does that process look like once someone places a call, makes a referral to child protective services, what happens from there?

Jen: So, not every call is substantiated enough to be investigated, but the department will decide whether or not to investigate, and if they do, they generally make a plan, and the priority is to try to support the family if at all possible and keep the child at home with the parent or parents through a variety of different social supports. But if there is a significant safety concern, then the child will be removed from the home and will enter the foster care system.

Jen: And I do think the threshold for investigation and removal is quite high for that to happen.

Autumn: And that's what you mean by saying 'substantiated,' is that correct? Becky, when you say, 'once it's substantiated,' so the state agencies have to have enough evidence.

Jen: There's a lot that doesn't warrant investigation or removal that maybe you or I would be uncomfortable with, but still it's not enough to require removal or anything.

Autumn: And then once an investigation is made, if it is substantiated and the child is removed, in Colorado particularly, how does that process work?

Becky: Generally speaking, they will call an emergency foster care placement and they will go into a foster care home unless they can find family immediately. But the state, throughout the case, is always trying to find family or other adults

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that may be involved in the child's life—a teacher or a coach or somebody that has a connection to the child that can care for them.

Jen: And usually, the referring county will try to find a placement in a foster home, you know, if no family or kin are found. And then, if they can't find a home within that county, then they start looking at private agencies to placement agencies outside the county and go from there.

Autumn: So, it's sort of this stepped approach; they look for family first, and then a placement in county, and then they start to turn to outside agencies?

Jen: Yeah, private placement agencies.

Autumn: Okay. And you- I think both of you mentioned this before, but the goal in Colorado—I know this exists in other places, but I'm most familiar with it in Colorado—the goal of the foster care system is family reunification. And so, as a foster parent, when you get a call that there's a kiddo who needs immediate housing, what's the experience like on that end? Both in receiving that call, assessing whether or not you can answer it, and then just what does this look like in processing that you're inviting in a kiddo to your home who is from a different family system, from a hard place, and that the goal of this process is family reunification?

Becky: So, in our family, because we have young children, we are only able to take in really small children. And so, the process looks differently than if I think we were taking in older children or adolescents, but part of it depends on what we have going on in our life and if we're able to take on another kiddo. But you just have to prepare yourself to love a kid and see what they need and to be able to give yourself to them for as long as they need it, and I think this is where it's really beautiful to see how our kids love other love foster children because they can do it with open arms and they don't question. It's not like, 'I will only love you if you're here for longer than two months,' you know. They just love them and play with them and share their toys with them and do whatever they can to take care of them, and, as a parent, it's fun to be able to learn that from your children.

Jen: And I think any family who goes through foster care training, part of that is some sort of formal checklist that you have to think through of what you would say yes to in saying yes to a kid, and then what is beyond your capacity to take in. Like, if you have no experience with medical issues, you probably wouldn't take in a kid who needed a G-tube or something like that. And so, when a foster family would get a phone call—I don't know if this is an experience with most foster families—but we would get calls for things that were clearly- we had already said no to our agency, but they will call you anyway. And so, just reminding ourselves of, 'hey, this is where my heart is, this is what we're called to,' and being able to have the emotional stamina to say no when it's okay to say no, and then to say yes when it kind of fits in where we feel best able to serve.

And I know, for Mark and myself, we had said yes, I want to say, to maybe six or seven calls. And then each one would come back with, 'sorry, we found a different placement for that person; we found kid for that kid; or this kid is actually going somewhere else;' before we actually got kids coming to our home. And so, a lot of it is just saying yes on faith. We're not really quite sure if this would ever pan out, but I'm just saying yes. And then knowing, like Becky was talking about, when you say yes to a kid, you're also saying yes to the situation that that kid brings. And some of the kid's backgrounds you're not allowed to know as a foster parent, and some you kind of learn after the fact, after you've said

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yes and you're like, 'oh, well, I didn't know that, but okay, here we go,' but bringing the kid's story and the kid's background and the kid's whatever; people are involved in that kid's life, whether it is biological family, or kin, or coaches, or teachers, and saying yes to that situation as well without actually knowing what it's going to be when you say yes.

Autumn: And it can look a myriad of ways once you said yes because of all of those things and the people attached and the particular situation. There is no script for what you are taking on.

Jen: You really don't even know when you say yes; you kind of get the bare minimum and you're like, 'okay, that meets those four boxes... okay, yes,' and then you learn later.

Becky: It's an excellent way to practice faith.

Autumn: What is one particular difficulty you've encountered in your process of fostering?

Becky: Can I give two? I think one thing is the amount of uncertainty, and it can just be challenging to sit in uncertain situations, particularly ones that keep changing, and still provide stability for the family in the middle of the uncertainty. And then also I feel like I'm often reminded that sometimes you have to choose to love people that you would not naturally be inclined to love, and that's a choice. And that living by faith is a choice even when your maybe emotions or the situation wouldn't naturally incline you to otherwise.

Jen: I'm going to echo what Becky said very well—agreed.

Autumn: And what is one really sweet, maybe unexpected gift that you have experienced from being foster parents?

Jen: I think for our family, because I have biological children also, and our boys came to us as older foster kids—they came at the ages of six and eight—just watching each one of them grow and mature and learn through the interactions with each other, watching my biological kids become their best selves that they wouldn't have become if it wasn't for their two adopted brothers, and watching the two adopted boys grow and learn and mature because of their relationships with my biological kids. I don't think they would be where they are today if they didn't have each other. It's beautiful really.

Becky: Yeah, I do really love seeing the impact that foster care has on the hearts of my children and just learning how to love people. It's also, it's—foster care is a really beautiful and broken situation, and I just remember one time I was rocking an 18 month old who had just been removed from her mom—didn't have any words—to sleep, and she was so sad and crying so hard. But then to feel her kind of like melt in and feel safe in my arms; it's a really beautiful thing to make a kid feel safe and loved even when their world has fallen apart.

Autumn: What are some of the day-to-day realities of welcoming a child or children into your home who have come from a really hard place and experienced an abrupt disruption in their life?

Jen: I think for our family, the day-to-day realities initially are kind of figuring out the strength of the kids and then what their needs are, whether it's, you know, they need to feel safe, they need to be responded to in a loving and therapeutic way, their needs, I think, for emotional stability as well, and then figuring out kind of where their triggers are.

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Unknowingly, you know, they could be reacting to something that you had no idea was going to bother them, and then working through what that looked like and finding different ways to cope and to become stronger and to move forward with that. So, those are all kind of like the emotional, maybe, needs of the day-to-day reality of taking in kids, but there's also a lot of physical ones. Just stuff like, do you come with clothes? Do you come with, I don't know, toothbrush? Do you come with, you know, if it's a younger kid, a car seat or diapers and things like that? –like some immediate physical needs as well.

Becky: I think one of the big realities for any foster family of any age is there are an astounding number of appointments and people in and out of your house. That can be just challenging to navigate because it happens overnight. I think with toddlers, also, it's navigating where they're at developmentally and what their needs are and what's calming and how to help them just cope with life. And the day-to-day realities for babies—most babies that are in the system, anecdotally—I don't know if this is prudent, like backed up by statistics—but many of them are withdrawing from some sort of substance and it just requires a lot of patience and a willingness to give up a lot of sleep.

Autumn: I want to ask you some questions about Safe Families specifically to help us get to know about the organization to understand why they exist, what they do, and then our involvement with them as an organization here at Fellowship Denver. So, first, can you just share what is Safe Families and what is their work as an organization?

Becky: So, Safe Families started in Chicago in 2003, and now they have chapters in 40 states and in a few different countries. But the chapter in Denver only started in 2019, right before pandemic. And so, if they've had a lot of just hoops to jump through in the last couple of years, but their mission is really to wrap around vulnerable families who, if they were to find themselves in crisis, have no sort of support network or safety net that could hold them up. And so, many of the families are in financial poverty, but they also- there's a lot of relational poverty, and they just don't have a safe person to call when they find a crisis.

Autumn: In all of our conversations, this has been a common theme that economic poverty and relational poverty or social isolation are so often intertwined, and that is true, you're saying, for these families who are often entering the Safe Families program. What is the mission of Safe Families? You mentioned this earlier, Becky, you mentioned three distinct points, but I think it's worth reiterating and dwelling on a little bit here because there's such beautiful parallels to what compels us as Christians, as followers of Jesus, to love people in a really sacrificial way. So, can you bring those to our attention again?

Becky: Yep, so the mission is really to keep families intact, but they approach it through radical hospitality, disruptive generosity, and intentional compassion.

Autumn: And that radical hospitality I think takes shape in the ways that you have to exist as a foster parent, in what you were just describing as your actual experience—opening up your home, holding your time, and your resources, and who and what you will encounter really loosely—is what that looks like I think, is that right?

Becky: Yes, it is, definitely.

Autumn: And what about that second point of disruptive generosity? How does that look in practice?

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Becky: I think one of the major parts of that is just remembering that everything we have has been given to us by God's grace, and that we're called to steward it well, and just not holding on to that but trying to look and see how we can use, whether it's financial resources to buy diapers for a family that is unable to, or an extra bedroom that can house a kiddo for a couple of days while their mom's in the hospital.

Autumn: And the third point of intentional compassion, I think this is so important for us to really wrestle with. What does that mean both in the notion of how does Safe Families envision that, and then what does that mean in lived experience in your lives?

Becky: I think that intentional compassion is deliberately choosing to love people. Dave Anderson was the founder of Safe Families, and he wrote that, without compassion, hospitable and generous actions are hollow and invariably become a chore. And he also said that when parents are empowered, appreciated, and respected, it creates hope and hope leads to improved wellbeing. So, that hope that comes from compassion is a critical component of what's needed to bring safety and security to vulnerable families.

Jenn: Just want to reiterate what Becky is saying too, I mean, it's choosing to be compassionate and loving toward a family when it's a really difficult situation or a situation you don't agree with, maybe some of the choices they made or a situation with different values or different boundaries, and then intentionally putting them above yourself and loving them despite the differences.

Autumn: We as the Church need to wrestle with is so much because this is exactly opposite the sort of cultural messages of what love is as far as an emotion and a response and something that is internally generated, versus what you're saying, that it is an intentional choice, and I think that aligns with both the way we see love demonstrated to us in the life of Jesus and in His death for us. He chose to love us and die for us while we were sinners—the Bible says while we were His enemies. And so, if that is the sort of love that is displayed for us and to us, then this is the sort of love that we're supposed to replicate. And—*but*—the way we're conditioned culturally I think does not teach us that, that's why it's so important—incredibly important—to wrestle with that and to choose to love, as you both are saying, and as you both demonstrate in the ways that you live. So how does the Safe Families program work? What does it look like for someone entering the program? And then, what does it look like for someone who's participating from the end of a church or signing up from the other end of that to be a host home or to help a family who's a participant?

Becky: So, referrals to Safe Families, for families that need the services, can come from a variety of sources. Different hospitals and different social support networks can refer a family to Safe Families, and then somebody at Safe Families will chat with them and help determine what would be helpful for them, and then they send out a request to the volunteers that have signed up for different roles. So, if they need hosting for a child for a few days, the request will go to the host families. If they need resources, it will go to the resource families. And there are different ways to become involved in Safe Families. You can become a host family, and that is where you're willing to take in kiddos for a period of time while the parent needs the space. And sometimes it's to find housing, sometimes it's because the parent is in the hospital for a couple of days and just doesn't have somebody else to watch their kiddos while they're there—there's a variety of reasons for referrals, but those are the top two reasons for referrals to Safe Families. In addition to being a host family, you can be a family-friend, and this is somebody that comes alongside the family. They may babysit kiddos for a little bit while mom takes the job training class, they may help the mom bring kiddos to the doctor's appointments; they

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just come alongside daily life and help the family navigate just the challenges that we all face. Family coaches also come alongside the family and they maybe help mom or dad access some of the social services that they may need and really serve as more of a coach while they work on their goals. And then resource friends are really there to help support financially or tangible items. If they need a car seat to bring the baby home from the hospital and they don't have the resources to buy that, a resource friend will come in and help with that.

Autumn: And how did our partnership at Fellowship Denver grow up with Safe Families?

Jen: I think it came out of a conversation at Embrace. And I guess for those who—at Fellowship—who don't know what Embrace is, it's a support system for those who have been touched by foster care, adoption, or vulnerable families here at church. And so, we have families in that group who are foster parents, who are adoptive parents, who are adoptees, who are participants in Safe Families either as hosts or as resource people, or there are people in Embrace who just want to support any of those families in whatever way they can whether it's financially, or just through items, or just as a prayer partner as well. And so, we were going through a book, *Reframing Foster Care*, and we were talking about, as a group, what it would look like to support vulnerable families in Denver before they enter foster care. And so, out of that conversation as a group came Safe Families and then our partnership, right?

Autumn: Yep. And did you already know of the organization, Becky, and the work that they were doing?

Becky: I had read about it in a book, and then Emily knew about him too.

Autumn: Emily oversees our pastoral care systems and ministry and helps lead Embrace and organize Embrace along with the two of you, I think—is that correct?

Becky: And the Coors.

Jen: Yeah, Josh and Elizabeth Coors are also integral forces.

Autumn: So, I wanted to wrap up our conversation today with asking our Fellowship Denver family to contemplate these ideas that we've talked about: what it looks like to hold our lives, our time, our resources with open hands to be used on behalf of vulnerable peoples as God directs us, and what it could look like to be involved with Safe Families specifically, or with our Embrace group here at Fellowship. And so, you mentioned some of the ways specifically, Becky, a moment ago, that someone can be involved with Safe Families if one of those roles is of interest to someone. So, being a host family or being a family friend or a resource partner—any of those different ways to be involved are of interest to someone, where could they go to get connected with Safe Families or to find resources about Safe Families?

Becky: The easiest way is just to go on to the Safe Families website. So, if you google Safe Families Denver chapter, it's a pretty easy website to navigate and it will show you the different roles and it'll bring you to an application that you can fill out online and you can go from there.

Jen: You can also talk to Becky.

Becky: Yes, you can definitely talk to me. I'm the one chasing the six children around the sanctuary.

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Autumn: I don't know, there are many, many children in the sanctuary, so it might be hard to identify. And lastly, I want to say thank you to both of you for the ways—for spending time with me today—but for the ways that you have embraced this in your life. I think those three areas of radical hospitality, disruptive generosity, and intentional compassion are something that you live out, and I'm so grateful for your presence here for your encouragement to all of us to consider this group of vulnerable families, those impacted by foster care, and then particularly through this new partnership with Safe Families. And, in thinking about this overlapping aspect of, often, that families in poverty are greatly impacted in a variety of ways by these needs, but really of this partner in it of relational poverty, how those two are woven together—what would you encourage people at Fellowship to consider as a parting thought, maybe what is a way they can be involved directly even if they assess their time and say, 'I don't actually know that I have space to invite in a foster kiddo, or Safe Families or host Safe Families. But there are definitely other, I think you call them "wrap around," ways to support a family that offer both financial or economic resources, even if they're in a smaller, simple way, and relational resources. So, what's your final encouragement as far as, 'consider these ways to be involved, and then ask God to direct you in that'?

Jen: I think the biggest thing would be to consider that God calls all of us to support in this area, and that we all have different gifts and that they all can be used to support vulnerable families in Denver or anywhere. There's a couple of books that talk about that that Embrace reads as well. There's one called *Until There's More Than Enough* and *Everyone Can Do Something* if anybody's interested in reading more about it. But there are so many ways that people can support. I know for Mark and myself, we are at capacity in our home both physically—we have no more bedrooms, no more beds; we cannot take kids into our home at this point—I'm also at capacity emotionally and relationally with my kids, but I can support in other ways through Embrace here at church. There's even creative ways that anybody can use their skills or gifting. Some of the ideas that have come out of Embrace are maybe a photographer takes photos of new newly foster families so the kid can see a picture of him or herself on the wall of their current home, or the kid has a picture to give to their biological family as well, or just to see themselves in a new way. There's been stories of people who've owned restaurants who would cater for a parent's night out or a sort of foster support group, and that's how they give back. They don't necessarily take kids into their home, but they would support through their business. There are stories of business owners who would take former foster youth or current foster kids and do a specific job training with them. There's stories of construction workers who would donate their services for anybody trying to become certified. I know for our home we had to have a handrail for more than five steps, and we had six steps, and so we had to put in a handrail to meet certification codes. So, there's construction workers who would offer their services to families who are looking to become certified. There's, I don't know what else; there's financial donations-

Becky: -We have a meal train with Embrace for people who either just are in a really busy season of their lives, because that happens, and also in particular when we have new placements because it's just a flurry of appointments and everything. We also have a resource closet for people who are taking in new foster or Safe Families placements, because they often don't come with clothes. But I think the biggest thing is just to be intentional about reaching out either to foster families or people that are involved with the families that you know or just vulnerable people that you interact with that you think might need a friend because, you know, we all need friends. And I think also approaching those relationships with some grace because you just don't know what sort of things people have been through or are processing and just looking for the best in people when you see some challenging behaviors.

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Autumn: I think that's an excellent way to land this: practice intentional compassion, look around you and see who it is that is in your life already that is in a vulnerable state or is in pain and ask how it is what you have, your life, your resources, can become theirs if you weave your life together with them relationally. You can offer your presence and your kindness regardless of what else it is that you assess that you have to offer.

If you're listening to today's episode and are interested in getting to know more about our Embrace community, you can find some information on Fellowship Denver's website fellowshipdenver.org. You can also email me any questions about today's episode or suggestions that you have for the podcast in the future. If you want to get connected personally to Becky or Jen, you can send me those emails too; send all of that any time to podcast@fellowshipdenver.org. Thanks for joining us on the Vision for Life podcast. Thanks to Adam Anglin for our theme music, and to our producer, Jesse Cowan.