

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 84 | Loving Our Neighbors, Part 4: Education

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Jill Anschutz



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 Vision for Life podcast, and Jill is joining me today.

Jill has been a longtime member and attender of Fellowship Denver Church and a friend for many years. And Jill is involved in education in our local area in a couple of specific ways which I am going to let her tell us about so that I don't give you any inaccurate information. But Jill, welcome, I'm so glad you're joining me today.

Jill: Thank you. I'm glad to be a part of the conversation.

Autumn: And, per what I just said, would you go ahead and tell us what your exact involvement is in education here in Colorado?

Jill: Yes, so I have two different volunteer roles. I'm the chair for a state board called the Charter School Institute, which is an entity of the state that authorizes about 42 charter schools, and it serves about 25,000 students in the public school system across the state. And then I'm a board member for Rocky Mountain Prep, which is a charter school in Denver and Aurora. We have four different campuses serving kids pre-K through fifth grade.

Autumn: And you have been- you have lived in Colorado for quite a while—for 15 years—and how long have you been involved in any sort of kind of political sphere or now particularly in this area of education?

Jill: Yeah, I actually got involved pretty soon after I moved here. I was working for a PR firm and I was assigned some charter school clients and had never heard of a charter school. I came from a state, Kentucky, that at that time didn't have charter schools and was very easily drawn into that model for public education. So, I got involved as a volunteer even though I was also doing some paid work at that time.

Autumn: I want to also mention, because it will be relevant in our conversation, that you have served in various roles at Fellowship and you currently oversee our partnerships, which we call Serve Denver partnerships, with many different area nonprofits. And we partner with those institutions and organizations specifically because they're doing good work in the city in a particular area of need or in sort of our social conception, what we would call areas of justice work, and they've been ministering faithfully to different communities in and around our city. And so, you oversee those partnerships as well. What does that entail?

Jill: So, our philosophy is that these organizations that run good nonprofits do it better than we could, so we should partner with them, we should direct our congregants to be involved in the city through them knowing that they're doing very holistic work that serves very practical needs, but also the spiritual dimension of our neighbors' lives. So, we have about four or five partners that we're consistently sharing with you about, letting you know what their needs are, and encouraging our members to be involved in a sustained way in these ministries' work.

Autumn: And many of our—we've mentioned a couple of them in weeks past—we had a conversation with someone who attends Fellowship Denver and works at Mile High Ministries, and then with our Serve Denver partners from Cross Purpose, an organization that is involved in career training and job placement. And then we will also have more

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conversations in the coming weeks around some of these same themes. I know that some of our Fellowship Denver folks have been involved in various ways in both of the two partners who we have hosted; do you have a sense that quite a few of our Fellowship Denver members are involved in one of the institutions, one or more of the organizations that are Serve Denver partners?

Jill: Yeah, I mean I think it fluctuates, but I know we typically have, I'd say anywhere from 15 to 25 people that are mentoring through Save Our Youth, which is one of our longtime Serve Denver partners. We had we just launched Cross Purpose last year, but we've already seen a handful of people engaged with that and we're about to kind of roll out the next sort of season of opportunities for that ministry. And it's- sometimes it's harder to track with some of our other partners. But yes, the bottom line is, yes, I think we work really hard to find partners that are a good fit for the type of resources and time and capacity that our members have. And so, we generally see great response when we let people know there's a need.

Autumn: In today's conversation, which is situated in this series of conversations, we're pulling in a few central themes. One is that love of neighbor is an imperative that Jesus centralizes in His teaching and that was also on clear display in the Old Testament law. And we're stating in these episodes that love of neighbor is sacrificial and active, and that Jesus states it as an expectation that following Him includes this sort of sacrificial, outward facing love for our neighbors, who we've said are people in need around us. And then we're also asking in these conversations, who are our vulnerable neighbors? And our final theme that runs through all of these series of conversations is that our relational presence is what ultimately makes the biggest impact in the life of a vulnerable individual. And so, today's conversation is a bit more broad than some of the others that were taking on because we're talking about education- sort of education from the local perspective. So, in the sense of, what is the state of education in the greater Denver metro area, and in consideration of the vulnerable populations and people that our educational systems impact and include and involve. And so, you mentioned one Serve Denver partner, Save Our Youth, that works specifically within this realm of educational institutions and helping vulnerable children and students. But more broadly, I want to say that education, because it has such a massive public impact, is something that we as the family of God—as the Church in a particular place and time—should be concerned with. And I'm curious what has compelled you as a Fellowship Denver member, as a Christian, to be involved in this area?

Jill: So, as I started to work with public schools in my work, really it occurred to me that each school community is basically a cross section of a part of the city. And so, I saw that as a very strategic place to lean in. You know, you can certainly build relationships with the people who live on your block and you immediately know, but then if you go down the block and you start getting involved at the public school, you sort of immediately widen the circle of people that you're able to touch because when you're working with children in a public school you're also potentially impacting their family. And you're potentially impacting someone at the start of their life in a way that we know statistically and through research over time can literally impact their life outcomes. Like what kind of economic situation they're in as they grow up, you know, whether they're likely to have good health outcomes. It's amazing how the early life experiences of a child show up later in life, and they spend so much of that early life in the school setting. So, I think it's a very strategic place to be involved in the life of our vulnerable neighbors.

Autumn: There are a couple of reports that I try to read as often as I can. One is published annually, and the other, the Status of Denver's Children, is a report that Denver County puts together, and it isn't published annually; I think it might

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come out every other year or every couple of years. It's very data driven and often is tied to census years, and then they collect data from other sources as well, but much of it comes from census data. And there's a statement in that report that says adults with a high school diploma generally report better life outcomes for themselves and their children. In addition to earning more money, high school graduates tend to live longer and are less likely to fall into poverty and rely on public assistance, which is what you were mentioning just a moment ago, how, really, someone's educational experience and their opportunity for education can impact their life in a variety of ways.

I'm curious what you would say, Jill, for our listeners who don't have children in the school system or aren't teachers or aren't themselves involved; they may not feel the immediate impact of what is going on in schools and in all of the— I am a parent, I have two kids in elementary right now and one in high school, and they're all in DPS schools at the moment. In this year, 2021/22, and in all of the correspondence that comes out from schools, they mentioned these— they always identify stakeholders. And so when I think of our church and think of it in terms of education, some people in our church are probably directly identified as stakeholders in public education because they're parents, or because they're students in the public school system, or because they're teachers—someone who experiences this direct tie and impact to the school system—but there's also this large group in the church who are just people who attend and don't fit into any of those categories. So, what would you say for our listeners who don't have children or aren't teachers or aren't involved directly? Why should they care about the state of our educational systems here in the Denver metro area?

Jill: I love that question because, for most of like the 10 to 12 years I've been involved, that was me. So, really big picture, democracy is a form of government that counts upon us having an educated voter base. And so, whether or not you're ever going to have children that are in the public school system, you are living in a community and in a country that counts on voters being able to educate themselves on issues and choose their representatives. And so, we have to have the majority of our population able to read and think for themselves, think critically, problem solve, things like that. I think if you bring it down more to the community level, the quality of the local schools I believe directly affects the strength of kind of the fabric of the community. You see it impacting, you know, what kind of employees you have in businesses or what kinds of businesses get started to offer services and goods in the community. You see it in generational differences. So, how far someone persists in the education system, if they finish high school, it's a major marker for their life outcomes, which of course affects whether they have children that grow up in poverty or grow up in a stable home environment. And those kinds of things, at a large scale, which the public school system is, really, really impact what your daily experiences are in your community, what your neighbors look like, what their financial situation is, and how stable or unstable their lives are. And I would also say, if you're a taxpayer, you're paying for the public school system whether you have a child or not, especially if you're a homeowner—that's a big source of dollars into the public school system. So, I think you should care about it as someone who's participating in how the system gets funded even if you're not taking advantage of it as a school for your child.

Autumn: This is very relevant to anyone who lives in Denver proper.

Jill: Yes, as you see your taxes, your property taxes go up every year. A big part of it is related to schools.

Autumn: How would you describe the situation in our Denver metro area regarding the state of pre-K through 12 education right now? Or maybe if you're looking at this through the families and students in the surrounding community that Rocky Mountain Prep particularly includes.

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Jill: Yeah, I wish I could be positive and hopeful in this category, but I think there's some very concerning data about the current state of schools in Denver right now. A couple of statistics I would tell you that are from mid-year assessment data from this current academic year indicate that things are not on track. In 3rd grade reading, which is an important metric that's tied to very long-term life outcomes. Like, whether or not you can read in third grade— you know, if you can't read, you're more likely to drop out before you finish high school, you're less likely—you're way less likely—to ever get a college degree, things like that. Only 30% of White students in Denver are on track with reading in third grade right now, and if you look at Black and Latino, basically non-White students in the school system, it's five percent of third graders that are reading at grade level. So, extremely concerning information to have. If you look specifically at southwest Denver, which is where Rocky Mountain Prep has a campus not far from Fellowship Denver, it's more like 3% of Latino students in southwest Denver who are reading on grade level in 3rd grade. I think part of that is attributable to the challenges of COVID and the impact that's had on younger children. And I also think you've seen changes at the Denver public schools administrative level that have taken some focus off of academic quality and are kind of distracted by other aspects of education, and that trickles down to the local school level at a very fast rate, that sort of distraction.

Autumn: You're right, that's not at all encouraging data, Jill. And as a parent who has now been involved in Denver public schools— so, my oldest daughter is a freshman at South and she has been in Denver public schools thus far her whole time in public education. And as I've watched what has happened from a parent's perspective in the last few years in DPS, what I have seen—and I'm wondering if what you're saying aligns with this—what I have seen is that, in the last few years, anything that gets categorized as social-emotional wellness or learning is receiving far more resources in terms of time dedicated to it, even time in the classroom dedicated to it, hires, and money and that has been to the detriment of academic pursuit. Does that align with what you're seeing from your position?

Jill: It does. And I'll give you an example sort of from the district level that just kind of connects those dots. I mean, if you're an education nerd like me and you watch the live streams of the Denver public school board meetings, which I do on a regular basis; I think if you counted up the last let's say five or six school board meetings, which is typically a monthly thing, they haven't talked about academics. The school board has not talked about academics in a public setting or publicly sort of like laid out data and said, 'here's what things look like.' And that's a big change from where Denver was and how the school board functioned even five years ago. There was a whole practice of publicly reporting academic data in a very transparent way. The numbers I just shared with you around third grade reading, that's information that the district actually concealed. And a friend of mine that works full-time in education advocacy had to make public information requests of the district to get the data to go through it and pull that information out. And so, just the conversations that you see among our elected leaders who run the school district reflects sort of that distraction from the quality of academic instruction.

Autumn: I want to point out too that, if you're a parent listening to this and you have— or anyone listening to this and you have this growing sense of unease, there are two sorts of assessment that you can engage in, and one is very particular to a school that your child may be involved in. This does still vary from school to school, and, for instance, even though I do see this present in both the elementary school that my children are currently in and the high school that my oldest child is in, that it is crystallizing in a very— in a much clearer fashion, even though it's present in elementary schools, this is happening much more rapidly in middle and high schools, and there's still questions to be asked of the particular school.

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Jill: Absolutely. There are still very good schools in Denver, and I would encourage people- there's a website called greatschools.org that rates schools based on both data that they can pull like publicly available data and then reviews from parents. So, you can look up the quality of individual schools in Denver.

Autumn: Yeah, I came from a very small community in Colorado, and navigating the public school system in Denver was and is so nerve-racking, and not at all intuitive. And *greatschools* has been a helpful resource.

Jill: Yeah, it's- I think actually—I'll say one thing on that topic—which is, Denver has actually- Colorado has what's called open enrollment, which means your child can go to any public school in the state. So, especially if you live in Denver and you live kind of on the outskirts of Denver proper, you might want to look at schools in a neighboring school district. Like, you might want to look at Littleton's public schools if you live in Denver but South of Hamden or Cherry Creek schools because you're not bound to go to a school in the district where your house is. The downside of that choice is it's harder to navigate because there's a lot more options available to you. You're not automatically assigned to a particular school.

Autumn: Yes, that is both; it has both this distinct benefit and some inherent difficulty navigating that. Jill, you mentioned something a moment ago that I want to go back to, and that was the- some of the data that is present about how schools are performing right now. And many times, that's categorized in terms of ethnicity and race in the outcomes, both a point in time sort of statistic as far as how schools and children are performing, and then also in the sense of in some reports, it's tied to particular educational outcomes for those groups of students. There are some demographic shifts in Denver in the last decade particularly that I think are interesting to consider in this conversation and interesting for the church to contemplate and dwell on because of our desire to love our neighbors well and because of our mission presence in the city, and even because of our partnerships with these different Serve Denver organizations. And one of the demographic shifts that I'm curious about and want to get your thoughts on also comes from these two reports that I mentioned earlier. So, I'm pulling some of this from the Status of Denver's Children. And then there's another report that I consult that's called the Kids Count Report, and that is an annual report published by the Colorado Children's Campaign. In these reports, you can see that the growth in Denver as a whole in the last 10 years has been rapid and has been primarily in this sector that is categorized as middle to upper middle-class White individuals. So, that's where the most growth has occurred the most quickly in our Denver metro area. But in terms of children, it's interesting because there's this pretty big divide. The most rapid growth in children in the population of children in the Denver metro area is in non-White families. So, as we look at that at the statistics that you mentioned earlier alongside this reality about this divide in the way our demography is occurring in the city, what should we make of that and how does that impact our conversation?

Jill: Yeah, I think that's really an important fact, and I'll even add a couple of specific numbers. This is statewide, but I believe it's reflected in Denver that in 2000 just 30% of students in Colorado were students of color, and now it's about 50%. So, it's been a very significant increase. I would argue it makes the schools and even nonprofits that serve these children, like Save Our Youth, even more strategic and important because there are places where they're increasingly serving children that are likely to be facing additional challenges in life. And it also matters because you see a big difference between the families who are served by the school system and the overall voters who make choices that directly impact the school system. And so, I'd say it increases—I would hope that our church feels—that it increases the responsibility we all have in choosing great board members when we have that opportunity in local elections, because even if our kids aren't- we don't have kids, because we're upper middle-class White, you know, we're in that population

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demographic, our choices impact those vulnerable families very, very directly. So, I think it just adds to the need to think about schools as a part of what makes our community strong.

Autumn: And it is incredibly important in that question of looking around assessing who are the vulnerable people in our communities and right around us and how, as you just said, our choices in the public sphere actually impact them. So, how could someone who is listening to what we're saying and says, 'yes, I agree, I see education as having this massive public impact—I understand that it's important in the lives of vulnerable children, particularly families living in poverty,' and then even in looking in our local Denver context with the particular demographic shifts that strengthening our public-school systems is going to be important for the entire fabric, as you've said, Jill, of our community. So, where would you point someone to be informed about the state of education in Denver, particularly as voting members of the county and state, where can we turn for some information?

Jill: I think there're two primary places I would point you and they- I think they both have reliable information, but it still takes a good amount of effort to know what's going on. Just- I want to put that out there as well. One is a website called Chalkbeat, which is- it's actually a national education news reporting platform, but there's a Colorado specific focus. And so, all of their reporting is related to things going on in public education. So, that's a good resource because it just cuts down the amount of news you have to sort through to get to something about our schools. I think it has a little bit of a bent toward the left side of the political spectrum. I think another resource I would offer news resource that has a bent toward the right would be Colorado politics, which—full disclosure—my husband's family is involved in ownership of Colorado Politics, but I do think it's a legitimately good resource especially for sort of news about local elections and how that's going to affect or shape what's happening in the school system.

Autumn: In the past, Hunter has also recommended to me personally the Denver Gazette, which is a local publication, but they just cover a lot of school related reporting.

Jill: Yes. Right. Exactly. And, actually that reminds me of another resource. There's a blog called BoardHawk and the guy, Alan Gottlieb, who writes that blog also reports for the Denver Gazette regularly, and he specifically follows what happens at the Denver Public School board meetings. So, if you're a parent who's kind of getting- really wants more information on that but you don't want to sit there and watch the live streams, I think Alan does some really good reporting on what's happening with the Denver Public Schools board.

Autumn: This is a fascinating insight into your lifestyle that you watch the CSPAN equivalent of the local Denver board meetings.

Jill: It's way worse than CSPAN—it's just like on YouTube.

Autumn: So, like our church services. You can watch a Fellowship Denver service, hop over, watch some Denver school board meetings.

So, I want to shift now into a sort of different frame of mind that is asking directly, then, as individuals who are processing this and taking this a step beyond just being informed about the state of schools, to asking what our response and involvement should be. And that has both this individual connotation and then collectively as a church family in the local area who has schools right around us and who is considering a different population of people to our west and to

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our east and what the needs are among those different populations, I want to ask how can we respond to what is going on. And I think of interest in this part of our conversation, as we consider those questions, is—from my vantage point as someone who has led kids ministry for a while, who is very concerned about the state of schools in our city, and who has students directly involved in an impacted by those schools—I think we're at a moment of what I would describe as divergence between the church as a whole. So, kind of the evangelical or even just broader Christian church in America and the political sphere. And I think this has been true through the whole of American history. So, my assessment, my very short assessment for sake of the podcast conversation, is that these spheres of politics and the church and education have an interesting and overlapping history in America, and it is one of repeated divergence and convergence. In the colonial era, many public educational institutions existed due to the concerted efforts of groups of parishioners who shared location and religious affiliation and just decided that their children needed a place to go to school to be educated. And so, these primary schools weren't necessarily the work of the denominational church, but at the same time many of the higher educational institutions that were being established in that same era were directly a result of certain denominations who wanted to be able to train their clergy and instill certain values and religious beliefs in the group of students who were attending them. And then, since that time, as the history of public schools went and the separation of church and state was solidified, I think there are these moments when the church has been very involved in the sphere of public education and then moments, due to what is happening in the political sphere and the fact that schools are state run, that have caused these moments of divergence.

And so, in our lifetimes, Jill—I think we're about the same, we're close to the same age—we've even experienced that. I think I've seen the decline of the previous Christian school movement in the United States that really had sort of its heyday right after desegregation and during the secular revolution when Christian parents, for various reasons, some of that was driven by the way evolution was settling into schools, some of that was driven by concern over the secularization of public schools and their moral values, and some of that in the south was driven by desegregation. So, we experience sort of the end of that Christian school movement, and then we've also seen this moment of convergence, I think, in a resurgence of evangelical fervor for cities that encouraged Christian parents and teachers to engage in the public square and to send their children to public institutions as a way to be involved in the public sphere, and to get to know their neighbors, and to bring stable presence to different areas of public life. And so, that was a moment of convergence. And now I think we're at this moment of divergence again where Christian parents are asking, can I remain engaged in this space? At least in Denver this is the case. Schools in Denver have begun to clearly and systematically emphasize progressive, secular moral values in a clearer and more distinct way than I have experienced in the past many years that I've been in Denver and had children involved in the educational systems, and those values are clearly exactly counter to Biblical ethics. And there is a new tone that doesn't leave as much space for disagreement. And so, I think Christian parents right now are asking, what decisions am I left with? And particularly in this way that has to sort through these competing values. So, the value of being present with our neighbors and being present in public institutions in a way that hopefully lends to, even if it can't solve, but lends to some sort of systemic health in stability, versus what are the pressures being put on my children when I send them into these institutions? So, am I weighing this care for vulnerable families and children and my involvement in these areas of public life against the very real effects in the life of my children? And so, that's what I'm processing, and I think that's what so many families at Fellowship, and probably across the country, are asking right now. And from your vantage point, as you've watched what's happening in public schools in Denver and around the state, how do you think through that? How can we balance those desires?

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Jill: That is a great and important, and also, I think, very complex question that's going to involve a great deal of discernment for any family. There's no right answer, I think, but I'm happy to kind of talk about a spectrum I think of what that could possibly look like for different families. I do think that there's both sort of a, like, top-down way to think of it of how might we be involved at sort of leadership influencing levels, which is the path I have sort of taken so far as someone who was not a parent. And if any of our listeners are interested in that, I'm happy to connect with you and help you even identify opportunities. I mean, charter schools across the community are always looking for board members. and traditional public schools are often open to volunteers even if you don't have a child in the school. And that can be a little trickier to navigate, but it's- the opportunity is there.

Autumn: On occasion, schools will allow community members to be part of their CSC, which is called the Collaborative School Committee, and that has to be made up of a variety of people. So, it has to include some teachers, some parents, and often some community members.

Jill: Yeah, and I- you know, I think an example- this isn't so much at the influence level, but at the practical level, I mean, one of our Serve Denver partners here at Fellowship Denver is Grant Beacon Middle School, which is the public school located closest to our church building. And you know, we've made some small commitments to the school around like we'll keep your food pantry stocked. And that's not a massive lift for our community, and that's something that I think even members of our church might be able to do that in a way that's meaningful to other public schools in the community. Like a fellowship group could take on, you know, a school that's near where they meet and serve them. And those kinds of things can open doors to being involved in serving in other ways. I think the bottom-up approach is more like, what kind of impact could my family have in a particular school community if we send our child to this to this public school? I think there's a real balance there to strike between, what will be my child's experience in that community? Like, what kinds of ideas and, you know, teaching, are they going to receive? What's the quality, like the academic quality, of that school? And is that something I'm comfortable with or not comfortable with for child or for my children? And also, you know, if you're the kind of- if your family is in a place where you're, you know, your eyes are open and looking for ways to serve and people to serve an impact in our community. If you're feeling like, 'well, we mostly know people that are like us,' a good way to break out of that is to send your child to a public school and build relationships with the families that are in your student's class who don't look like you or don't live in the same neighborhood that you live in. I just think that's something that, to me, what I wouldn't- what I would do if I made that choice is make sure that I'm involved, right? That I'm present in the school, that I'm getting to know those teachers myself because those relationships with the people actually influencing your children are the best way for you to know what's really, you know, happening in your child's day-to-day experience at the school. So, it's not something I would passively do. I wouldn't just pick a public school and send my child there and be hands off about it. I think it would have to be an intentional focus of your family to build relationships in that community and stay connected to the school in a way that you're sure what your child's experiencing and you can address that at home if there's differences between what your child's learning and being taught and the way that your family, you know, the worldview and the perspective you have as a Christian living in a secular world.

Autumn: There's another group of people who are directly involved in this conversation, and those are people who are working in schools. And we have many of them here at Fellowship. We have many teachers, a handful of administrators—school administrators—who served in different administrative roles. There are some people who attend to- are in a couple of different positions within DPS administration, and those people I think are wrestling with these

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same tensions. So, I've talked to many teachers who are asking the same thing. They are asking how they can navigate the clear secular moral framework that's assumed in our educational systems with grace and clarity and kindness, and I don't know that there's a clear answer except that the gospel empowers them to do that, to be in that space, in what is a pretty contested space right now, and to be present in a way that directly impacts the lives of students, many of whom fit into this category of vulnerable students. And do you have any word to offer to them, Jill, just as someone who is on a board who works directly to shape, hopefully, and lead- direct a school to people who are in that group?

Jill: Yeah. First of all, shout out to teachers and school administrators who have had what seems to be a couple of the hardest years ever on record to be in that profession given the way that schools were so heavily impacted by COVID19 and the changes that made to what was expected of them and how they could get their jobs done. I have never been a teacher; I've never worked in a school; and I think that's probably an important thing to say about my perspective on the topic, but I think- I absolutely agree that working in public education right now as a teacher, as an administrator or in the district, to me it's a kind of frontier space where you see progressive ideas and the gospel really coming head-to-head. And I think winsome, faithful presence by people working in that field is super important work. And I know if you're in that field, you certainly don't feel like you work in ministry, but that is the frontier of where a lot of these hot topics are sort of being negotiated in like real time by real people. And, if you're a teacher or a school administrator, you have incredible influence over how those issues ultimately impact the classrooms. And I don't mean to put that on you as like a huge burden like we're all counting on you, but more of like, I hope and I would encourage you to kind of open your heart and your mind to how God might be calling you in that space. And it can be as simple as, you know, not retreating when difficult conversations come up among, you know, your peers about how you're going to handle a certain topic or what you're going to do, you know, when particular issues arise within a particular classroom like a child that is facing sort of questions around gender. And you can speak into that in a loving way, and occasionally you might be called to speak into it in a bold way, but I think on a daily basis a lot of times it's about maintaining relationships and sort of soft influence in how you lead and how you might lead differently than other people you're working with who don't have, you know, the power of the gospel and the truth of the gospel permeating their lives.

Autumn: One thing that I've seen so clearly happening in middle and high schools is just the level of confusion about so many things. Gender is at the forefront of everyone's mind, and that is one clear way in which I think teens and preteens are confused and sorting through what is being left to them to sort through, which is an impossible question, and because we would say it doesn't align with the nature of created reality, but it results in this sort of confusion that is weighing really heavily on them. And I think in so many ways, the way that we have attempted to answer some of the historic, systemic issues that are real that we have to deal with have resulted in destruction of categories and structures that are helpful for kids. And so, one aspect of the gospel that is very clearly afforded to all of us, to parents, to educators, to you, Jill, is that the gospel does give us this beautiful clarity. And I think that is, in terms of being winsome, something that will be compelling for many people in the public sphere. So, someone who is in a purely secular, progressive space, and being informed by that set of values, may find the attractiveness of the gospel in this way, in the clarity that it offers. And I think when we're relationally attached to someone in a place like teachers and educators are, that that's something that we can consistently gently offer even in the way we live, even if the ways in which teachers feel like they can challenge or state things directly right now is sort of minimized, but their presence there still allows them to live out the clarity of the gospel. And I think that that is and will be so attractive for some people, particularly young people, as they're wading through what are really confusing issues right now.

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 84 | Loving Our Neighbors, Part 4: Education

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Jill Anschutz



As we wrap up our conversation, we started out—or I started out—asking you to help me address this question of whether or not we as community members bear a responsibility, aside from voting to engage in education or in students' lives, and I think you and I would both say, yes, contemplate how you can be involved if that is, as you mentioned from a sort of top-down way, being informed in being active in how you vote for school board members and in school board elections, or from a sort of bottom-up way in the way that you explained it, Jill. So, here at Fellowship, if someone's just beginning to contemplate this- so, if our conversation has stirred something in them, what are some segues into this whole area?

Jill: The first thing that comes to mind for me would actually be thinking about volunteering with Save Our Youth, one of our partners, because Save Our Youth is all about- they connect you with one child that you build a relationship with, and you make at least a year commitment to getting to know that child. It's a child who has expressed the desire to be mentored, so you know you're setup, I think, for success because it's a relationship the child is seeking. And they're serving the vulnerable families across our community that are in public schools. And the reason I suggest that as a first step is it will open the door to you getting an idea of what is this child's life like, what challenges do they have at home, what barriers do they have to learning and being successful and having the kinds of choices and opportunities that you've experienced in your life. And I think starting at that space of kind of understanding the problem and impacting one child is a very doable and reasonable thing to incorporate into your life. And I think there's a couple other avenues you and I ought to have talked about; Whiz Kids, which is a tutoring program, which is actually kind of similar. You work with the same child every week, but it's structured around helping them with a particular area of homework or schoolwork. And so, it's a little bit more structured than just mentoring through Save Our Youth, but it's a similar kind of opportunity to get to know one child and through that child to have your understanding of what their life is like, and how it's different from yours, expanded. I think that's a great starting point. And I think if you're interested in other ways of volunteering, like being a school board member or something like that, again, I'm happy to connect with you and explore whether there's an opportunity for you in that space.

Autumn: We've stated in all of our conversations to this point that long term change is most effective in the lives of vulnerable people when we relationally weave our lives together with them, and Save Our Youth and Whiz Kids provide a way to do just that, to get to know one child and one family and to be present with them over time, and then this sort of relational stability and transformation becomes possible. Jill, thanks so much for joining me today and for sharing both your heart with us and some of your particular insight. I've enjoyed our conversation, as always—I love talking to you. I'm glad to have the chance to have an extended conversation on the podcast.

If you have questions or comments or suggestions whether about today's episode or something you would like to hear us discuss on the podcast in the future, or if you'd like to ask me to connect you with Jill, feel free to email 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.