

Transcript 86

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. On today's episode I've got a Beth DeVore, one of the Got Questions employees. She's the administrator, associate editor. Basically, she does everything I tell her to do. All the stuff I don't want to do, so Beths going to be joining me on the program today and we're going to be interviewing her former pastor Alan Cross. Beth I'll allow you to actually do the introduction today and introduce the topic that we're going to be talking about.

Beth DeVore

Thanks, I wrote it down so that I don't stumble over my words too much. Alan is the pastor of Petaluma Valley Baptist Church in Petaluma, CA. He was born in New Orleans. And regularly posts pictures of gumbo, jambalaya and crab cakes that he makes, which I feel personally is unloving for most of America and does not reflect the love of Christ. Alan has done significant work with both immigration and the history of racism in the Southern Church. He's the author of *When Heaven and Earth Collide*, *Racism, Southern Evangelicals and the Better Way of Jesus*. And *Joy Perservering The Ray* and Ruth Bozeman story of a living in a better way of Jesus.

Beth DeVore

I met Alan when I attended his church in Montgomery, AL and I can affirm that he and his wife, Erica could do strive to live the better way of Jesus rude photos notwithstanding. So Alan welcome to Got Questions podcast.

Alan Cross

Thanks Beth, good to see you again.

Beth DeVore

You too sometime I'd really like to sit down and have some long conversations about your work with immigrants and refugees and your deep work with racism in the history of the American Church. But today, I wanted to talk about something a little more immediate for our listener. And I grabbed this quote off your Facebook page, week after week the church gathers, encourages, points to Jesus, remembers the good news, strengthens the weak, and embodies the work of God among the lives of real people in a real place.

Beth DeVore

As a Baptist and as a Christian I know what you mean here is bringing people to a saving relationship with Jesus, but knowing you would also includes meeting practical needs in your community. How do you see these two things meeting practical needs and spreading the Gospel. How are they related for you?

Alan Cross

Yeah, I I really I really see them together. And you know, thank you for that question. I mean I, I definitely believe that man's biggest problem is separation from God through sin and that Jesus and his

work on the cross is the only solution for that as he forgives us and we're regenerated. We're born again and he puts his spirit within us. And so all of that is core and central and the preaching of the gospel, is the preaching of the work of Jesus, as we see in First Corinthians 15 is death, burial, resurrection. And new life in him and so that's core, but all of that has effects and implications and it plays out in real life and so you know, we weren't just given a ticket to heaven that we punch and then that's it.

Alan Cross

You know there's a whole life that's lived and there's a way that the gospel is demonstrated, but through what we do, that's our witness. And it's the way we love people. It's way that people see who God is and what God is like, and so the way that we live and the work that we do and whether we love people and care for people that embodies the truth about Jesus and then the gospel.

Alan Cross

So we're not to live these separated bifurcated lives where we have kind of the spiritual aspect that we in church and with justification. And then the rest of it's optional or maybe just personal and then just kind of how we have our own personal actions that that kind of reflected devotional life. It's all supposed to spread out into society, in our community, and that happens through the work through the work of the church.

Beth DeVore

I was recently in Everett, WA helping my mom clean out her house and there's a local church in Snohomish that has what they call a Med shed where people can bring medical supplies they don't need anymore, anything, from walkers to bandages. Then anyone can drop by and get what they need, and I thought that was fantastic. I first learned how involved your church is and meeting real needs when the forest fires were going on. Can you talk a little about that?

Alan Cross

Right, yeah I had gotten here in a really May- June 2019. My family got here in Northern California and the summer in July of 2019. So I was just really getting started. This was October and I had gone to seminary in the San Francisco Bay Area, North Bay. That's how I got reconnected with this church after spending several years working on behalf of them against immigrants, refugees in southeast, and so I just got out here a few months before I've probably been maybe three or four months and maybe four months and the Kincaid fires happened, which are these massive wildfires.

Alan Cross

If you've been paying attention to the news the last several years, really since 2017 at Northern California and California altogether actually, it's just every August, September, October has been engulfed with fire. Now I grew up in Mississippi Gulf Coast, New Orleans, Gulf Coast, and that's hurricane season for us. And so there's this whole thing that you do in churches do each year. Where they think about. Hey, you know we could have a hurricane in any time, let's make sure we can receive people and help and have our supplies and all that, and so I've now realized to think that way about fire season and in California, but I was watching it and it was really really dry and the winds were picking up and I had just been following it and there was there was a guy in our church, Joe, who was working with some folks in town and I saw that he was trying to help prepare for some things that they could happen.

So I called him and said, hey, if you hear of anything that that we can do as a church, anything that's needed, please let me know. And so he passed my name on like Saturday night. Like at 9:00 o'clock, he said, hey, our church could help and so I was following it.

Alan Cross

I saw what was happening. People were starting to leave their homes and about 5:00 AM on Sunday morning city leaders disaster response I think like the Emergency Preparedness group or something. I forget exactly who was, but they called my cell phone and I woke me up. This was a Sunday morning and said we need your church if you're willing to be a shelter and I said, OK, not knowing that my church had never done that before, I thought that they had done it before and so I didn't talk to church council or leaders or anything. I just said OK and so called my associate pastor and said, hey, we're going to be housing up to 150 people in a few hours.

Alan Cross

So we have to get ready. He's and he was like OK, and I mean you know he but he jumped all over it. We kind of talked a little bit ahead of time and so by that afternoon you know we had a different kind of church service. A lot of people didn't come because of what was happening and they were just trying to get ready, and but then we had people start filtering in that afternoon and so by that night we had about 150 people and we became one of the major shelters in Petaluma where several 100,000 people had had to flee the northern part of the county and so we worked with city leaders. And we worked with county leaders and World Central Kitchen. I don't know if you're familiar with them. But Chef Andre, they're doing incredible work all over the world in feeding people in disaster situations. But they set up in our church and they have amazing food. And so it's really, really fantastic food.

Alan Cross

But we had people staying there and we and we started doing this thing, so this is really kind of how it plays out. We just said this is what we have to do. These are our neighbors. These are our friends. We have a place that's about 30 miles South of where the fires are in northern Sonoma County. Maybe 20 miles. Actually we were probably about only about 15 miles from where the fires were coming down into Santa Rosa, but we were like the first town where people could run to, to be safe, and so we had to open our doors. There's no real question about that. The church came out and they were helping, but we did this thing because I've been sheltered before with hurricanes and work for the Red Cross. And so we did this where we fed everybody and after breakfast and after dinner we said hey, if you'd like to come over to the sanctuary, so we had our fellowship hall. If you'd like to come over the sanctuary for like a Chapel service, we'll be there. We would pray before the meals. But there was nothing else we didn't like force people to listen to any type of a devotion or anything like that. But we made it optional and so the first day a few people came over by the 3rd or 4th day about 50 people were deciding to come over. And so that and it was the last day that I had really shared the gospel strongly, and it was a lot of Hispanic neighbors. And we did, we translated it into Spanish, and I think 17 people came to Christ on the 4th day.

Alan Cross

And then it ended and then the whole thing they were able to go back home. But then that evening city leaders, the mayor, the chief of police, City Councilman, came out to our church and fed all of our

volunteers to thank us for the work that we had done. Now this is Sonoma County, San Francisco, North Bay, where you know the understanding with a lot of people that Evangelical churches aren't really well accepted and I think probably maybe 3% of our population is considered to be Evangelicals. So to have all the city leaders come out and thank us for this work and to recognize that we're doing it because of our faith in Jesus but also just to thank us for being good neighbors. That was really powerful and it really sent a strong signal to our folks that there is a way to minister and to love and to support them to help and to plan the gospel even in the midst of a community that is not really totally aligned with that all the time. You know so. And then we learn that people aren't as hostile as sometimes, sometimes the narrative goes. You know that everybody is against you. In reality there are lots of ways we can work with our neighbors in our community, and Jesus can be a big part of that.

Beth DeVore

Did your church, have the food pantry before that, or did that come out of help with the people running from the fires?

Alan Cross

No so we were just helping people with the fires, but then COVID came the next spring and so we like everybody else not knowing exactly what it was. We kind of shut down. Well, well, everything was in California, was forced to shut down and so we did for a few months, but as quickly as we could, we tried to figure out well, how can we gather? Because you couldn't even go to parks, you couldn't go to the beach, you couldn't do anything. Everything in in some towns that you went to they were writing \$1000 tickets if you weren't from that town and this was in the San Francisco Bay was really really strict and they were monitoring everything and there were tip lines for neighbors to call if they saw people gathering anywhere, it was really crazy. This was, you know, the spring of 2020 and so we tried to figure out. OK, how can we meet?

Alan Cross

And there was a loophole that if you're if you're feeding people, or if you're doing any type of thing where you're helping people because people are losing their jobs, and so we found out that we could start a food pantry and we could gather around that. And so we went through the process as quick as we could. We applied. We did training everything, and we became a certified food distribution center for this big kind of food warehouse. I forget what it's called now, but it was up in Santa Rosa. North of us and. So we would go and we pick up the food. We bring it down and then we would have folks gather on Tuesday afternoon, so that's when our church began to meet, and so we would, we would pray and we would share the word, and then we would pack grocery bags and we were feeding about 70 families a week and people were coming by and you know people who were in need or lost jobs, and so the food pantry became our church for several weeks before we were able to re gather again. And then we start meeting again. We met outside but then we did it for probably about 14-15 months where we provided food for people and that gave us an open door into people's lives and were able to share with folks and, you know, you know things like that.

Alan Cross

And I pray for people, but it really mobilized our folks to get out into the community and deliver groceries and have people come by and then from that too we became a COVID testing site for the

county and so in our city there were four COVID testing sites of three of them were in churches, so anybody who need to get tested could come to our church parking lot and do that.

Alan Cross

So there was just a lot of things that every time we see something where there's a way we could help, we do. But then we also use this opportunity build relationships. And then and. Then to share Christ and as we can. You know, as things open up.

Shea Houdmann

So Alan, your story fascinates me just like I love what you guys are doing and how your is being the hands and feet of Jesus in your community. Several years I remember it seemed like every Christian ministry I heard of was doing an outreach of it, say drilling water wells in Africa or fighting human trafficking or fighting racism. And all these are good and very necessary causes things that Christians should be involved in.

Shea Houdmann

But some times I would talk with some of them and they wouldn't the ministry would never actually get around to sharing the gospel, but to me, the hands and feet ministry opportunities give us an open door to actually share the gospel. 'cause if we meet the person's physical needs as well as important as that can be, but then don't actually follow through with explaining. We did this because of what Jesus has done for us. We want to show his love to you. If we don't take that extra step, ultimately we're missing the mark of what God calls us to do as Christians.

Shea Houdmann

But my question for you is may give us a couple of examples of how ministering to the people in their needs and their time of needs have resulted in them being open to hearing the gospel just and I know you've shared briefly some, some people have come to faith in Christ through your church's outreach, but what are just some examples of people who were willing to listen to what you had to say because of how you ministered to their physical needs?

Alan Cross

Yeah, I mean we really see it all together as witness. I mean we don't, we don't do these things so that we can then share the gospel. We do these things because the gospel has implications into all of life and so it transforms us and makes us into a different kind of people. And so, as we, minister and help and share and come alongside people, Jesus is a part of that. So we speak of him and. I think just being open and bold and I recognizing this is who we are and so things kind of it isn't just a one shot thing where OK, I'm going to do this now. You have to sit and listen to this presentation. You know that that that's not which I know you're not saying, but I want to be clear that that's not the approach that we take. We see it as kind of a holistic presence in a community. And so when we're the church who helps with the fires, we become known as the church that cares about people. When we're the church where you can go get a COVID test then it's like, oh, that you know, you know, that's a resource for us, so being present.

Alan Cross

You know Beth I think you left Montgomery before we really started picking up on this, but we started the Fall festival there and so we had this big thing that became like you have 1000 people that would come on Halloween night. We always did on Halloween, 'cause that's when people would be out. And so for some people, that was the only time they interact with our Church was this big festival and we shared the gospel with that, but they also, but then people knew that you know, they would say that's my church because that's the only church they ever go to or anything. So that's kind of, you know, that's kind of how people start to see who are away from God who don't go to church at all. When you provide these opportunities for service, you know we would have people who would come up to us and actually one person from the neighborhood came and brought us a check for \$500 when they saw we were helping with the fire victims, you know, because they said you're doing something and I don't go to church and not, uh I'm not a Christian, but I'm but thank you for what you are doing and so all of those things open up the door for conversations to happen about why we're doing it.

Alan Cross

We are very upfront and very bold that that we are followers of Jesus and that there is a way of salvation that is only through Christ and so we speak of that when we were given the opportunity to so we don't like it's not a bait and switch. We don't do these things so that we can then lead somebody to Christ. We do these things. 'cause that's what it means to follow Christ. And so we demonstrate the life of Christ through the works. But then as we build relationships with people and talk with people, people open up, they share and we ask, how can we pray for you, you know?

Alan Cross

And then there's this this idea that this is what you know, this is who Jesus is. So we embody that message through our work, that which then leads to opportunity for us to have conversation with people and talk and then people come on Sundays, because they see what we're doing and because they want to be a part of that kind of community. So yeah, it just opens up the door for us to be that that that witness that presence. And we do have a chance to share who Christ is through all that.

Beth DeVore

I can't help but think that your church is, I guess, submission to the California government to abide by their regulations but being creative in reaching your neighborhood, even through that, has had an impact on not only the neighborhood, but like you said, the government officials. Kind of reach them in some way. Is that true?

Alan Cross

Yeah, I think so. I mean, we were as aggressive as aggressive as we could possibly be within the guidelines. We did everything we could. We met outside for 11 months under a pavilion. We bought heaters. We bought chairs. We built a stage, you know we put a plastic sheeting to keep the wind out in certain areas, but still to abide by the rules of being outside and so we didn't meet for those first couple of months there at the beginning of Covid. But then we, you know we were online the whole time.

Alan Cross

You know, at the beginning and we came back. That's probably faster than or as soon as anybody did in our area. But if we had, just like flaunted all the regulations, we would have been a pariah in our

community, because the of the mindset of everybody here everybody was working so hard and they were sacrificing so much. And then we had this church the middle of town, it was just ignoring all of it. That would have really hurt our witness for years. It would have been. It would have been very, very difficult. So we just try to find ways. How can we be faithful? To meet and to worship and to be the church. But then do that in a way that we can minister to our community where they are and we were able to do that. We never had any COVID spread in any of our gatherings. You know. I mean, that can still happen covid is still out there. So we're still trying to be careful, but we also have seen people come to Christ. We've had baptisms we've had. We've had new people come. We've had, you know, some people have left because of moving or because of different situations or wanting to make a change. Since there's that ebb and flow with all of it in normal church life.

Alan Cross

But overall we tried to be a presence in our community that's been helpful and that's been ministering while holding out Jesus the whole time and so not putting yourself at odds with the community that is struggling but coming alongside while still the same time, making sure that you're being faithful called the Lord. It's difficult, it's easy to kind of jump to 1 extreme or the other, but there's a reward there I think and how it shapes and disciples, us, you know?

Beth DeVore

Yeah, definitely, and I understand that you're working with other churches in the Bay Area as well?

Alan Cross

Yeah, you know we're Southern Baptists, and so we have our Baptist associations and we're trying to work with, you know, with other churches both here in the North Bay to encourage and to and to share resources. We do that in our in our city Petaluma and but also throughout the Bay Area. We've been working together with other churches to receive of Afghan refugees, so a lot of them have been coming into the Bay Area, and so they're, uh. Apparently it's the South Bay and East Bay, and so we're a little bit set apart from that, but we've done a lot with a, you know, raising money and support, and you know things to come alongside and just trying to encourage that work and so. Working with other churches is really key 'cause you can't do all this by yourself, you know. And then when we need each other when you need each other you become dependent on one another. You share, you pray. And then you see what God is doing in other churches. How you can come alongside and help. So yeah, we try to do as much as we can.

Shea Houdmann

So Pastor Allen, if you would speak to another pastor who is looking for ways in his community to reach out, and what are some of the key points? What are things that you look for? Obviously a natural disaster like a forest fire, whatever, that's an easy opportunity, but well for just a church going about it's normal weekly business. How does the church find what opportunities for ministry in their community when normally the their tendency is just to gather on Sundays, then go their separate ways during the week.

Alan Cross

You know God is always working. He's president, working before we ever get there. He's left signposts and. And you know things in people's lives, and so part of our job is to kind of discover that you know to be to be pioneers in the work of the spirit, and to see where the Lord is already at work ahead of us, and then to join him in that. And so we you know, are trying to encourage our folks to you know think about people's needs to be aware to just kind of see what is happening around you. And to be present with people and to share the love of Christ and so loving people is a pretty active thing, caring about people caring about your neighbors, checking on people, seeing what needs are, seeing how you can help. It's a very powerful thing and the gospel is all wrapped up in that you know, there's a reason why we live in a neighborhood. Jesus came put on flesh and you know the incarnation. He came and lived among us, and so the church present in a community with people and the gospel kind of being shaped by or the way the gospel is expressed is shaped a lot by what we go through on a weekly and a daily basis and so being aware. And being present, you know, thinking about what people are going through, we are about to church.

Alan Cross

But you know, we follow the church calendar, and so it's been really helpful because people think about things at different times of the year, right, and so the gospel kind of goes along with that we have begun looking at our county in our community and you know things related to nature. And you know, the Redwood trees and the coast and the vineyards and. And how can we tell the gospel story through the things that people see everyday? Which is what Jesus did. Jesus walked along and he would point at things he say the Kingdom of God is like this. The kingdom of God, like a seed, the Kingdom of God is like you know this field and you know it's just you know one thing after.

Alan Cross

Another he would point to that people understood in their daily life and so. So you know we're trying to do that too. And so as you live in a place, and as you're present and you're not just, you know, having a church service. I say this all the time. That church is not a concert in a lecture. You know it's the body of Christ coming together and living together. And sometimes we make it all about Sunday morning as opposed to how do we come together to learn about who God is and then and then share that with others. I'm saying a lot to say that being present, being aware, having your eyes open, thinking about what the needs are in your community and you cannot meet all those needs but you. But you can put a signpost down.

Alan Cross

You know, we, we, you know, and I feel like I haven't even really gotten started here in ministry because it's been COVID and it's been fires. But that has been ministry. We haven't got to start with all the plans we want to do, but. But you know when you're aware of a need in your community, if you could just be a part. You don't to solve the whole thing, you can just be present and sticking a signpost down and say this is what the Kingdom of God looks like in the midst of this of this problem or this issue, or this opportunity. And that witnesses, you know I've heard this many times and I've been saying this for years, so we're not called to win, were called to witness. You know how people respond to the gospel is what God does, but we're called to tell about what we know and so sometimes I think we get a little bit intimidated because we see the needs around us and we see that a lot of people aren't Christians or they don't go to church and we try to somehow convince them to come to our church, and so that puts

us immediately in a very almost a defeated position where we're almost begging people to come and be a part of what we're doing, and we get discouraged if they don't.

Alan Cross

Instead, we're ambassadors of Christ. We carry this message wherever we go. If there's five of us, we get to tell this story into the midst of the world we live in, and God has already been here at work before, so it's a very powerful thing. Like we constantly get to live in victory no matter what other people do. No matter what happens around us, because we are emissaries of the most high God, and so recognizing that makes us cheerful. You know, we get to be a cheerful witness. We get to love people if people reject us we can still love them. It's OK because we get to hold out the word of life and then it's up to God how he works in our hearts and it's up to them how they respond, but I would just say take every opportunity you can. We started this thing a few months ago where we just start doing a hike every like once a month. I think we did once in the fall we've got twice so far in the new year, and so there's this couple that's been hiking and with their family. So I asked, I said, hey, what if people from the church could join you so they said, OK, it's the first time we had like 14 people go and I think it was like 6 different nations and backgrounds represented with that small group and we did it again in January we had we had about another, you know 14 or 16 or something. And then they did it in February and I wasn't even able to be there, and 40 people came for the hike and people invited friends and neighbors came and people don't go to church at all because they heard about they were doing this and so now we gonna do it again this month. And we're gonna do it over Easter weekend. We're gonna do a hike up some coast and so it's just like what are people interested in? Where do people want to gather? So the desire to gather now is like really present amongst people 'cause we've been so isolated for so long. And so how can you step into that? And so that becomes a ministry. You know, walking with people I could keep going. And we're we run out of time and there's like a there's like 1000 different things that I get excited about it, so yeah.

Beth DeVore

Your team and with solar.

Alan Cross

Yeah, that was a something they've been talking about for years and it saves us money and it's a way to give energy back to the grid when we have these blackouts and stuff. And, uh, and so it'll pay for itself in seven or eight years, as we do that. But it also is a way to kind of, you know, help share the light that we receive. It's kind of a funny analogy to like we receive the light instead of just like using it for ourselves, we get to store and we get to share it with others too, so.

Shea Houdmann

So Pastor Allan I love what you're doing. Keep it up brother and keeping a light to your community. And I'm encouraging to me to hear all that you're doing in the impact that it's having. So and thank you for being on the show today and sharing some of your passion, your insight and just hearing your guidance for other pastors we appreciate it.

Alan Cross

Yeah, absolutely. If I get if I could just leave you with one thing you know what we think about is how do we tell a better story? You know, how do we step into these difficult things and just tell the better story of who Jesus is and how he loves us and how he transforms our world and we don't have plans and programs all the time to do all that. But God shows us as we pray, and it's really. It's just a powerful. It's a powerful journey so it encourage everybody else to be encouraged in that and walk in that.

Shea Houdmann

Thank you again Alan, and this has been the Got Questions podcast, so you want to learn more about Alan and also the book that he's written. It's a great read and we'll include a link to that in the at podcast.questions.org at the show notes and also at our description field on YouTube. So if you want to learn more about Alan and stay tuned for that.

Shea Houdmann

This has been the Got Question podcast Got questions? The Bible has answers. And we'll, help you find them.