

Cultural and Social Realities of Ministry in South Africa With Nate Bell

00:00:00:01 - 00:00:24:00

Nate Bell

I think 80% of the country identifies as Christian here. So that's another dynamic is a lot of the country looks like me. If I don't open my mouth, they think I'm Afrikaans and I get spoken to an Africans and, you know, four out of five on the street. We'll tell you, the Christians. And as we unpack this, you know, there actually is so little genuine faith in the gospel articulation of Christ and his salvific work.

00:00:24:00 - 00:00:31:14

Nate Bell

It's tough work.

00:00:31:16 - 00:00:59:03

Alex Kocman

Greetings and welcome to the Missions Podcast, the show that explores your hard questions on missions, theology, and practice to help goers think and thinkers go. I'm Alex Coachman, director of communications and engagement with AB. We joined once again for an exciting foray into the world of Mis theology and theology and culture by the one and only Scott W Dunford, pastor of Western Hills Church in San Mateo, California.

00:00:59:07 - 00:01:23:01

Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

You'll get access to live quarterly webinars where you can join us and interact with us on mic in real time, and so many other benefits, including a free gift. So sign up today at [mission's podcast.com/premium](https://missionspodcast.com/premium) and Scott's. We are pleased to welcome today an old friend of both of ours, Scott, a friend of yours, at least a contact of yours from when you were here at a.

00:02:05:20 - 00:02:11:22

Alex Kocman

We back once upon a time when you were vice president of mobilization. Back in the good old days.

00:02:12:00 - 00:02:18:05

Scott Dunford

When Nate was just a kid from a kid from Ohio, bringing coffee for all of his favorite, headquarters workers.

00:02:18:07 - 00:02:41:14

Alex Kocman

And I would take coffee from him. I would pay top dollar for this guy to brew us a cup of coffee. And without getting too far off course, I don't many. I don't know too many other people who have coached competitive baristas. And yet that's one of the many things in our guests bio today. And, Nate, why don't you give us a far better introduction than the one that we've just botched for you?

00:02:41:16 - 00:03:05:08

Nate Bell

Oh, that was great. No, I don't think I could have done that better. You know, we are here, and, Yeah. Well, thank you guys for letting us be here, but we're here, from Cape Town, and, Yeah, the past life. You know, we talk about the good old days. Has been in coffee, and it's been a joy to, for the Lord to use that as a connecting point in a in a ministry within itself.

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Nate Bell

And but, you know, I don't do as much of that. I haven't lost it. It's followed me over here on this side, but now we are, more involved. The focus is, is not coffee so much as the, the soul work of, planting and, working towards planting a church, seeing biblically faithful churches in Cape Town, South Africa.

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Nate Bell

So family is based here. We made that move over in 2019 and have been, serving alongside at a local church here, Mountain View Baptist Church and, yeah, getting connected, familiar, learning the stories. You know, looking forward to having this conversation now and sharing what we have come to learn. And in regards to all of the history and, a complex history that is over on this side and ministering with the brothers and sisters here.

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Alex Kocman

Yeah. And I have to say that the history of South Africa, it is just fascinating. And most Americans don't know the half of it. I mean, the most that we know is maybe what we've seen on the news over the years about Nelson Mandela, and that's about where our knowledge ends. And there's so much more there. I'm sure a lot of people approach you and you're sharing about your ministry as a missionary, and they have a lot of assumptions.

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Alex Kocman

And we want to kind of unpack that. What started this conversation? Brother, of course, we want to give you a chance to talk about your ministry with Allawi. But what also started this was a few short

weeks ago when we saw, that the United States brought over several, refugees or asylum seekers who were Afrikaners, which is, America, not a man.

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Alex Kocman

Excuse me? South Africa's, Dutch colonialist descended, white population. If I could maybe give an oversimplification, I'm sure you could explain kind of the cultural make up of really what makes the Afrikaners who they are today. But that really struck a chord, to say the very least. In our racially contentious media culture.

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Alex Kocman

And, of course, there's a media culture there, on your side of the world that's also very contentious around these issues. And it really brings up this deeper question of, okay, what is missions? Is missions just going to the people that that are totally destitute, that that don't look like us at all? Or is missions also sometimes going to the people in places that maybe do look a lot like us and might even be a little bit more on the affluent side or something like that, but need the gospel as well.

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Alex Kocman

So rather, what I want to do is really just give you a platform to share. How do you approach that question? What's what do people get wrong about your ministry, and how have you had to explain that to others? Especially in recent weeks, as this has been in the news cycle?

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Nate Bell

I have to agree with you in regards to the uniqueness of the history and the development. The colonization of South Africa. And I think that's important to just speak about first, that makes this country so particularly unique to work in. Having spent some time and study in East Africa and studying the colonial history of a number of those, I think it's right to say that in most cases, everywhere else around the world, there was really one colonial power.

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Nate Bell

In the case of South Africa, the colony, this area was first settled by the Dutch and then taken over by the British in war, each of those particular colonial powers brought in people, groups, their slaves from other colonies to come and populate and work here, even as their own people settled in here. And all of those start mixing and mingling.

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Nate Bell

And you get this, this interesting dynamic where you know, there are white South Africans of British descent. And they have a particular view of other white South Africans of Dutch descent. And there's, you know, not complete unity even within one of those classes of people. And let me say this up front, too, over here, it's politically correct to identify these people as white colored and black.

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Nate Bell

And that is that is the way that they identify themselves over here. So we're talking about black South Africans color, South Africans and white South Africans. But within each of those groups, they're sort of sub, you know, subcategories of those people. And they, they look at each other differently, don't see themselves necessarily as the same even among that white South African group.

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Nate Bell

And so you have all of this mixing over. We've got, you know, a huge population. I last heard maybe the second largest population of Indians outside of India itself, over here on this side and mixing into all of this part and the Cape Malay that, developed into this is the Dutch brought slaves over from Malaysia to populate over here.

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Nate Bell

And it's all mixed up in this together. And so there's, it's very complex. If you, if you take a look at the history. Fascinating. Recommend the book by it's, it's historical fiction, but it's by James Michener and it's called The Covenant. It's like some 1200 pages or something, but worth it. Excellent. But helps kind of sort out some of those dynamics.

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Nate Bell

So all that to say. Yes. So, so how do you bring together. Because I think if we catch up now to where, where we're at. And obviously there was years of this apartheid policy where those it was those white Afrikaners who had the power and had, you know, organized a system of inequality and, you know, a sort of caste system, if you will.

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Nate Bell

And, after the first free elections there in 94 that, you know, that power sort of shifted right in the African National Congress and Mandela and in this kind of catches up to how you let us off, Alex, that might be the most the most familiar history with people as from this point moving forward, where now the power had totally flipped upside down and you have black Africans in power and systems and policies put in place.

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Nate Bell

And, you know, now you have what is what is coming to a head. And those other previously privileged and empowered people group now themselves identifying and feeling, you know, being able to apply for refugee status in another country and making sense of all this. So, you know, that's sort of the historical and colonial development, the varying people groups.

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Nate Bell

It's just a very, very messy, our ministry right now involves more of that, that white Afrikaner side and the British, the white South Africans of British descent and the colored and historically, that group, that colored group in the middle, didn't have really much advantage on the one side or the other

side of apartheid, on the other side with the ANC in the black Africans now, you know, ruling and governing the country.

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Nate Bell

They're better off in a, in a sense, but they're still kind of stuck in the middle. And so I've had conversations we, you know, with all of these brothers and in regards to how they reflect on this in the state of the country now and, and, of course, within the church or in the world, the only real hope is the gospel here and so but navigating that and unpacking some of that, I I'm still learning as people note things to me that I didn't see as any sort of, of offense.

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Nate Bell

And some other brother has taken offense, with another and how someone handled a situation. I that was I was totally oblivious to me. So I'm grateful to be able to play the ignorant card on some of these dynamics to understand what's behind the way that we're interacting together. But, appreciate the prayers as we try to figure out how to live with the unity, you know, the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace here and working that out in a church and what that looks like with all that baggage, behind it all.

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Alex Kocman

The biggest thing that stands out to me, from even just what you're sharing and hinting at somewhat, is the sin problem, the need for the gospel. It really does cut across every people group, every socioeconomic bracket. That's true here. That's true there. That's true in any people group that will minister to, I do think that there is this problem that we have as Americans, maybe just with the marketing that we've consumed around cross-cultural ministry where we think of missions as in these far flung places, with the most exotic looking types of peoples who are very different from us, be that, you know, culture or dress or skin color or music or food,

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Alex Kocman

all of it. And we forget that, you know, sometimes it looks just very ordinary. I think in a lot of ways, obviously Afrikaners are not identical to Americans at all. And then in other ways, there might be some superficial similarities. They need the gospel as much as, any other group does, throughout the continent.

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Alex Kocman

And the same can be said of any of the people groups that we're going to be ministering to. Scott, I want to hear from you, obviously a question, but also any reflections from you as well? I mean, I know, Scott, when you ministered in a very different context, but in Asia, you know, you kind of stepped into your own interesting.

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Alex Kocman

I don't know, you were sort of in the crossfire between the different people groups that that don't like each other. We look at and we're like, well, that's all China. Well, not really. You know, the Uighurs in the Han, like they're not really getting along too much and you've kind of had to navigate, how do I be a good houseguest in this other country while in the midst of all of these really deep seated rivalries that that are going to be here long after I'm dead married, did you know that it can take anywhere from 18 to 24 months or more for the average missionary to raise their financial support?

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Alex Kocman

The journey to the field is an arduous one, and for some missionaries it goes by quicker than others. Other missionaries are waiting for the right prayer and financial partners to come alongside them and hold the rope for them as they go out to reach the lost. And so would you consider praying for and maybe adopting an ABW pre field missionary, somebody that's already been commissioned and sent out from their local church, and the only thing keeping them from having a fruitful ministry on the field is simply their ability to get there.

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Alex Kocman

You can go to ABe.org/prefield and find a pre field missionary. Whether you just want to pray for them or whether the Lord would lead you to give to one of their ministries, find one that you can support today at abe.org/prefield.

00:13:32:10 - 00:13:51:02

Scott Dunford

My history and thinking about South Africa goes back to being a boy during kind of the beginning of the end of apartheid. And there was a there was a runner in South African I think her name was Zona or Zola Budd. I don't know if that. And it rings a bell to you guys, but she was actually one of the best runners.

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Scott Dunford

She ran barefoot, this white, white South African who was banned from the Olympics because, they were not allowed to run because of apartheid. And then, you know, watching this movie called The Power of One, if you ever seen that, I don't know. But this little boy who's in this, he's a British boy in a German, prisoner of war camp in South Africa.

00:14:12:13 - 00:14:31:22

Scott Dunford

And you're like, what's going on here? Was the history of the of the Africans people plays into that. And then reading a biography of, of Mahatma Gandhi and him making as he's living in South Africa, making the case that because he is Aryan, that he should be treated like a white person, not like a black person.

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Scott Dunford

So he wasn't fighting against racism. He was saying we should be considered white because we're Aryan. And but then but really my most those are just some interesting anecdotes, but probably my most profound like think thinking about and it kind of even explains part of the confusion is reading an early biography of Andrew Murray. A lot of people are familiar with Andrew Murray because of his books on prayer, but, I'm reading this biography.

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Scott Dunford

Andrew Merino was hugely impacting in my life as a young college student. As he was, he was going to the train. I don't know how to say this correctly. So Nate, correct me. Transvaal is that close.

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Nate Bell

That's not bad. That's not bad.

00:15:09:09 - 00:15:40:00

Scott Dunford

And okay. So he's ministering in the Transvaal to the Africans. There and I'm thinking, oh, he's going to an African, black African people group. And, I'm talking about, like, the godlessness of the people and the difficulty of the ministry there. And just the grind as people are just rejecting the gospel. And he's just having a very hard time in his ministry, and yet him just persevering and being faithful in that spot, only to find out later on that he was not ministering to a foreign people.

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Scott Dunford

He was ministering to his own Dutch descendants, you know, and is probably in the in the text. But I, I had a hard I couldn't pick it up because of just it was such a different milieu. So from what I understand, you know, the African people have been there since like the late 1600s. What is the spiritual environment amongst the Africans people today?

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Nate Bell

It reminds me a lot. The so the Dutch Reformed Church, which obviously has wonderful roots in, in truth and biblical faithfulness, but however, it looks quite different here in South Africa. In fact, the closest and easiest comparison for me to describe what we're dealing with when we minister among those white South Africans, particularly the Afrikaners, is that the Dutch Reformed Church is no different than the Roman Catholic Church.

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Nate Bell

It's work space, salvation, that the gospel is not present in there. In fact, there's a growing, there there's a group nearby out here that's, just started by a friend of ours, the Institute for the Reformation of South Africa. And his aim is to try to see this Dutch Reformed Church, this tradition here. That started off so well here in South Africa.

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Nate Bell

But to call them back, you know, in the spirit of the Reformation, back to the truth of the gospel, you know, we speak a certain language, but, you know, in the, in the, in the interactions that we've had these individuals coming, you know, across and coming into our church or coming into our ministry, and they can't articulate the gospel, you know, when you ask them about an experience, you know, or any, any type of conversion that they've had?

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Nate Bell

They are they're speaking about their confirmations and they're in their baptisms and they're, you know, their years of membership and their, their parents here and, and all of this in regards to the debt reform church. I remember when we first came over in South Africa, together in 2014, we were in a, a, a, a public school, which, you know, by God's grace, you can still go in and you can you can still teach Bible in public schools over here.

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Nate Bell

For now. And you know, this this is a is a school that had such a rich history of, you know, biblical truth, considered a Christian school by every other measure that besides that, it was not it was not a private school, but it was it was run by Christians and had deep roots in Christianity. And asking this, this class of grade six students, all of which affirmed their salvation, every hand went up in the room, you know, if they died today, they would be there in heaven with the Lord and asking them, you know, then, what?

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Nate Bell

Why is that? You know, how would you be in that place and not a single student there mentioning Christ? All of these largely class full of white South African students and not one of them articulating the gospel, professing Christ in any way. And so that's what we encounter when we interact with that's the background from and even and it affects us in, in our ministry as we get individuals in, in they're familiar with the gospel.

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Nate Bell

They make a profession of faith. Now it comes time to be baptized. So now they've all been baptized as infants in the Dutch Reformed Church. And it's a big statement then for them because of what it communicates to their parents and to their grandparents, that here they are as adults and they're coming forward. And we have to work through the implications of what baptism is all about now that you are professing faith.

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Nate Bell

So, you know, we as you know, I think 80% of the country identifies as Christian here. So that's another dynamic is a lot of the country looks like me. If I don't open my mouth, they think I'm Afrikaans and I get spoken to in Afrikaans and, you know, 80% of the people. So, you know, four out of five on the street, we'll tell you, the Christians.

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Nate Bell

And as we unpack this, you know, there actually is so little genuine when faith in the gospel articulation of Christ and his salvific work, it's, it's tough work.

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Alex Kocman

Well, and it's just a reminder, the same can be said for Europe. Missionaries are still needed in the shadow of Christendom. I would hear from people that would say things, you know, well, you know, yeah, the strategic ministry in South Africa is to Indians. You can reach them outside of India. Well,

perhaps that's true. That doesn't mean that the other 80% of people there, just because there's a legacy of Christianity doesn't mean that they have the biblical gospel.

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Alex Kocman

They need to know Jesus Christ personally and not just be associated by heritage with a particular church or tradition. But let me shift gears just a little bit, brother. We're hearing stories now of and you pronounce it much more authentically than I do, but the Boer population, which maybe that's just a synonym for Afrikaner.

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Alex Kocman

Or maybe there's different connotations to both, you know, farmer versus the class in general. But, reports of, of land grabs, of burnings, of farms, circumstances where this corrosive, I would say unbiblical ideology, this ideology that sort of pits oppressor against oppress, is, is now sort of really it's George Orwell's Animal Farm essentially happening where, those who perhaps would be considered by one framework or another, oppressed are now rising up in this overreaction against another people group.

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Alex Kocman

And again, we're seeing just the problem of sin and the need for the gospel in so many different ways among these peoples. But tell us what's actually happening there and then how you and your ministry are able to bring biblical truth, into, a lack of clarity and just the cloudiness of all of those circumstances.

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Nate Bell

That's another, you know, complicated dynamic in that, you know, whether or not this is, you know, how much of this is, is aggravation, you know, an expression of just aggression and frustration with power that, you know, this, this reverse system now, and, and in a, in a country where there's still 40% unemployment and, you know, 30 years ago, the government made promises to provide the jobs and, and homes and plumbing and electricity to all of these people who previously had not.

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Nate Bell

Well, we're 30 years from those elections that that governing power the ANC has, has, has failed to deliver on those promises. Of course, they would never be able to do so. And so, you know, some of this is just the expression of frustration of for, you know, a certain level of entitlement that these, these, these things were promised, you know, by this government coming in, we're now liberated, apartheid policies abolished.

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Nate Bell

We're going to have all these things. And 30 years later, you know, you have this, this frustration. It's not there. And yet some of those, you know, white Afrikaners who held this power, they still have their land and their property and all this other, you know, so, yeah, it is sad, but there are even cases where, where, where land has been has been removed.

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Nate Bell

You know, land expropriation, it's been taken away. Zimbabwe is a case in point of how badly this fails. You know, we keep reminding like, look, if we go this way, Parliament's approve this for the case. You know, if they deem it fit that it's best for, best for the state and best for the people to do this.

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Nate Bell

They've approved it. They can do it. They can take land away and they can they can give it to whom they want. And there are just so many instances, obviously, you take, land away from, from people who have farmed land for generations after generations.

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Alex Kocman

And given, in some case, their ancestors, in some case, their ancestors settled the land. Right? It wasn't the case that they displaced an indigenous people when they arrived. Or did they?

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Nate Bell

You know, there may be some instances of that, but largely they went to go find and move away when the British came in. So the Afrikaners took off. They didn't want anything to do with the British here. And there's obviously the, the Dutch and the or the, the, the board war was a was a conflict between these two.

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Nate Bell

But yeah, that's right. They went off to where there wasn't anything and began to develop communities in these areas. Yeah. So that's right. That for, for generations this had been their land. And then you hand those things over to people that don't have any experience. And you, you know, you become Zimbabwe and in short time, as these things are practiced.

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Nate Bell

But, you know, there is there is absolutely, you know, Julius Malema in the SS and I know these things are growing among the young people that are frustrated with this, you know, 40% unemployment and lack of opportunities and jobs as they feel frustration with their government that promised these things. And, you know, I guess the simplest out is looking over at your neighbor who still has in his working and living and has a home and all the things that you don't have that were promised to you.

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Nate Bell

And the easiest route seems to be that, you know, well, fix this government. Let's take it, you know, develop a policy where we get this stuff, which obviously doesn't fix anything.

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Scott Dunford

So obviously, you coming as an American missionary into a very complex situation with lots of different people, groups, a lot of controversial history, trying to plant churches and equip churches. What do you find your role as a missionary to be in this political hot spot.

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Nate Bell

In light of that history, these different communities have been, you know, isolated and cut off from each other. So, you know, we dream about a church that looks like what the church we see in revelation four and five, where there's every nation and tongue and language and people surrounding the throne, and we're worshiping together, you know, to want to see that reflected here is another reality where this community over here lives there.

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Nate Bell

And they really stay there in this community of people for years and years under apartheid lived here. And really those lines still look while they're not, you know, practiced anymore. And it's not it's not policy anymore. Many of these people still live in those same communities kind of behind those bars. They're permitted to buy property here and there and there.

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Nate Bell

But as a result of, you know, opportunity or lack thereof, they're still there. And it's there's not a lot of crossover in those communities, you know, so trying to find and plant a church and minister where there is more of that cross mingling of these different groups, is extremely difficult to find a place where everybody is comfortable in there in to work out those dynamics together.

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Nate Bell

But, you know, certainly we trust the Lord. We need a lot of prayer and trying to work this out and seeing, you know, this is still learning. And, you know, I'm humbly, apologizing a lot for what we don't understand. And some of the ideas we propose, you know, wanting to come in here and, and not go out and plant the church that we imagined, but come immerse ourselves in a local church.

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Nate Bell

And that's what we've been doing for years now, and serving one particular church and wanting to see it, you know, mature and grow and become biblically faithful and be launched out with them and a host of other families that can tell me, the American, you know, you know, some other ideas and get some other input. Because I don't understand all of this.

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Scott Dunford

It could be helpful for people listening to try to understand because you're saying, you know, we sometimes have to apologize for things that were misunderstanding. What are the kinds of things that you find? Missionaries are misunderstanding and have to kind of walk back later.

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Nate Bell

You know, in generally speaking, it's easy to look on the outside and go, okay, you know, apartheid is gone. You know, you guys are free to move around in different ways. And yet there are there are realities that we don't see and understand about movement in certain places and certain areas, and how certain groups interact and perceive those interactions.

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Nate Bell

You know, I'm still learning that if I want to make a just, just be generous and gracious to somebody, there's a certain level of expectation on how that's perceived as me, a white person trying to be generous and hospitable and doing, you know, and these, these dynamics that you don't see, but then are, you know, could be perceived by the other person of a different color.

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Nate Bell

You know, their skin is a different color, and they perceive these acts in light of the history that we've described. And yet obviously there's there is, there is grace in the body and understanding these

things and talking about these things. But getting to play ignorant is, is, is a great blessing. Getting to play the dumb American is a wonderful blessing here.

00:28:01:22 - 00:28:04:11

Nate Bell

It's a great card. I use it often.

00:28:04:13 - 00:28:05:13

Scott Dunford

00:28:05:15 - 00:28:27:08

Alex Kocman

Well, I want to talk more in detail about what we need to know and how do we address the same cultural trends that we're seeing of one group being pitted against another group? How do we address that in our midst? Based on some of the lessons that you're learning, Nate? And we're going to deal with that in our overtime segment for our premium subscriber family.

00:28:27:10 - 00:28:50:15

Alex Kocman

For the rest of you, you can join that at [Missions podcast.com/premium](https://missionspodcast.com/premium) for your gift of 999 per month or in the Apple Podcasts app. You can subscribe directly to the page, show directly within that, and we so appreciate those of you who are resourcing us, allowing us to do more. You know, it costs money to keep the lights on and to upgrade equipment and do things that need to be done.

00:28:50:17 - 00:29:18:21

Alex Kocman

And of course, we are a ministry of we, but we also appreciate that what you do in giving helps us to be able to do more. So join us for that bonus segment and to learn more about Abdul, we go to abdul.org and see how you can take your next steps in the Great Commission, whether that's sending, whether that's praying for workers like Nate or giving to them as well, you can give to him

and his ministry on our website or simply, maybe figuring out how you can go and be used among the nations.

00:29:18:21 - 00:29:27:07

Alex Kocman

You can find out all of that on our website. And until our next conversation on missions and theology, go make disciples of all the nations.