

# 14. Family Preservation & the ...volvement with Megan Boudreaux

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## SPEAKERS

Lauren Pinkston, Megan Boudreaux

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**L** Lauren Pinkston 00:05

All right, we have a big conversation today that is going to be incredibly relevant for the people who have come to this podcast, especially from the faith community. I love interacting with those of you who have kept one foot very firmly planted in church involvement and local community of faith, but have kept another foot firmly planted in a willingness to question the ways that we have interacted with the world, with our neighbors, and have said, "What does it look like to reform and restore the church that God put in motion and Christ allowed us to engage with?" Today we're going to continue our conversation around the complications of church involvement as it relates to orphanages and the orphan care movement around the globe, and I have someone with me who I have followed for quite some time and I think is going to be able to just bring some perspective as a practitioner, as an adoptive mom, and as a nonprofit leader - just someone who is makes this whole conversation accessible to us. So Megan Boudreaux is here with us and I am thrilled to introduce her to you guys. Megan, welcome and why don't you start out by telling us about a quick overview, we're going to dive deep into your story, but a quick overview of you and what brought you to this podcast today?

**M** Megan Boudreaux 01:31

Sure. Wonderful. Thanks so much for having me. I'm excited to discuss all this today. I am a mom of six. I have three adopted children and then three biological children. My husband and I have been living in Louisiana from Haiti. We moved about two and a half, three years ago and getting settled now into the life here in the United States.

**L** Lauren Pinkston 01:55

And that is could be an entire podcast in and of itself - that journey back. And you said you're in Lafayette, Louisiana? There's some fascinating history with Lafayette himself and how Louisiana got started. But, gosh, I guess we'll save that conversation for another time. I could

nerd out on history all day long. All right, Megan, talk to us about your journey to Haiti. What led you there? And then we'll kind of we'll delve into some different directions, maybe, of where your mind and your learning and your theology took some twists and turns while you were there.

M

Megan Boudreaux 02:35

Sure. Yeah. That's one of the questions I get a lot is you know, "how did you end up there and was this a plan that you had all along?" And ironically enough, it definitely was not. I never saw myself moving to a place like Haiti. I was actually working at a hospital doing some public relations and marketing, and they needed somebody to go to Haiti way back in 2010. And it was right after the earthquake. And I they asked me and I actually said no, and they asked again, and I said no. I call it being volun-told. They were like, "You're the youngest in the office. We need you to go." So I went to Haiti and just had such a challenging time. I had not really been out of the country. I've never seen so much devastation. It was right after the big earthquake in 2010. And long story short, I ended up feeling like, okay, this is actually somewhere where I'm supposed to go and so in 2011, I moved to Haiti thinking it would just be for a few months and it ended ended up being almost 11 years. And yeah, the journey of you know, what happened with God opening up my eyes to what was needed and what was going on. It was long and it was arduous and there was a lot of challenges but at the same time, it was very rewarding and also has kind of led me to what we're going to talk about today.

L

Lauren Pinkston 04:01

That's incredible. So my husband was on one of those early flights down after the earthquake and, you know, you just see massive amounts of international money coming in. It was truly devastating. The images that we saw after the earthquake were compelling and Haiti has traditionally been a place where loads of international relief has been dumped, right? So that complicates a culture and a system that bleeds into the orphans and vulnerable children space, for sure. So how did you come to the work that you are doing in family preservation and vulnerable children?

M

Megan Boudreaux 04:47

So it's a very interesting story. I mean, within the first couple of months of me living in Haiti, there was of course, several orphanages that were very close to where I was living and I would often go and just kind of visit them and, you know, back then in 2011, that's what we thought, "Oh, let me go care for the widow and orphan. Let me go visit orphanages." Within a couple of visits, I realized that something was not right with this whole system. There were a lot of American churches coming in and out. One week they would be filled with, you know, mattresses and all these clothes and then the next week when the American church was gone, there was nothing. And so since I was living there full time, I was able to kind of do some more meticulous research or just stopping in and actually started, you know, having conversations with some of these kids. And I realized that most of them had families, most of them even had parents that were coming to visit them in the orphanages. And so, the whole dynamic of me understanding that orphanages, you know, didn't house orphans, it was just children. That is kind of where this like, you know, this something was awoken in me and I was suddenly like,

"oh my goodness, like this is not what everybody thinks it is." And so over the course of the next few years was really when I started trying to sound the alarm of hey, you guys are actually supporting, these American churches coming in are actually supporting keeping children from their families because the orphanage directors feel like they have to keep up this image that they have all these, you know, helpless orphans and that was not what was happening.

**L** Lauren Pinkston 06:26

And what was your experience like as you tried to share this information, tried to sound the alarm, tried to bring awareness to what you're seeing on the ground being there full time instead of, you know, jumping in for a week? What was that experience like and what kind of feedback did you get?

**M** Megan Boudreaux 06:42

It was hard, it was hard. I was not very well liked. I was the naive young 23, 24 year old that was telling these megachurches that they should not be pouring the funds and coming to visit touring these orphanages and just this entire Savior mentality even years ago, I was like, "This just isn't right." And I saw the harm that it was doing to the children. And I saw how unfortunately, you know, how important it was to get the pictures and to have all of these VBSs and everything being done in the orphanages so that they could bring it back to their churches and show them what they did. And, you know, sounding the alarm on that I was, in a lot of cases it was kind of blacklisted. Like, "Oh gosh, don't talk to Megan, don't talk to Respire. They don't like orphanages, they're not going to support what you're doing." And it took a while for a lot of these organizations to come around to realize that I wasn't just trying to be the meanie, but I was trying to point out that these kids had families and that the trauma and the emotional, psychological harm that these churches were causing by visiting and you know, just dropping in and showering them with gifts, and all of these things, and then leaving, it really was hard for other people to see what I was talking about.

**L** Lauren Pinkston 08:03

I think about going back to the places that we know and the places that know us the best and how often those are the places that we are least received as as disruptors in this space. I'm curious, what was that experience like for you on the Haitian side with the orphanages that were there with the, you know, the care providers that were there? Did you have this conversation with them as well? Did they see you kind of disrupting a system and what was that like?

**M** Megan Boudreaux 08:34

Um, yeah, it was it was really like I was stuck in the middle because in some ways, you know, the caregivers and the people that worked at the orphanage, this was their job and even though they knew that a lot of these children had families, this was how they were earning an income for their family. And then on the flip side of it, I would hear parents that would, you know, be begging the orphanage directors to take their children and then the orphanage

director would say, "Well, you have to pay me for all of the months that they stayed here." And just things like that. I realized, man, it was just a double edged sword of these parents want their children back and these caregivers have a job and so I had to walk this fine line of saying, "Hey, we really need these children to go back to their families and the people who have jobs, there's other ways that you guys can have income." And so we tried to start thinking of different ways to safely kind of, you know, disseminate or shut down these orphanages that were housing a lot of children that had families.

**L** Lauren Pinkston 09:33

Okay, I want to just clarify that I heard you correctly - that when birth families were coming to the orphanages and requesting that they could have their children back, their biological children back, that the orphanages were saying you will owe us for every month that they have been here? Am I hearing you correctly?

**M** Megan Boudreaux 09:53

Yeah. It's just something that is very unfortunately common in Haiti. We've seen it dozens of times. We've seen it within our school whenever we have parents that come to us and they say, "Hey, you know, we have three children in school, but we have another child that's in an orphanage and we can't get him out. Can you help us?" It's unfortunately something that we're very well versed on having to handle.

**L** Lauren Pinkston 10:19

This episode is not directly linked to human trafficking. But that is, I mean, that immediately sends off every red flag for me of someone who has been coerced into a living environment and then is being held against their will with exorbitant fines used as a way, or debt used as a way, to hold them into a location. So that's another form of exploitation that, gosh, there's no way that is the story that's being told in a lot of our churches in the United States. Would you agree?

**M** Megan Boudreaux 10:48

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah. That, I would say, you know, that requesting financial support because they had supported the child. And the other thing that they do often in Haiti is they hold their paperwork. So we have a lot of students, and we have just actually have an entire fund for helping students and families get birth certificates, because we'll say, you know, fine, you can have the birth certificate. You know, as long as the parents have the information, sometimes they'll go and take a picture of it and then come back and bring us information, but they'll withhold paperwork as well, thinking that the parents won't take the child because the birth certificate is so important, you know, for them to have about with their child. So it's it's challenging.

**L** Lauren Pinkston 11:30

Lauren Pinkston 11:50

Yeah, documentation and immigration and migration is something that we often have a lot of opinions about, but having never lived it. For those of us who have never lived that or the the realities of being undocumented or someone else holding on to your documents, it's it's a totally different ballgame than probably what we imagined.

M Megan Boudreaux 11:53

Absolutely.

L Lauren Pinkston 11:54

All right, so what happened next? You start to see these gaps kind of appearing in care and maybe even your presupposition, is that the right word? The things that you thought before. We didn't study that word in grad school. So what what happened next?

M Megan Boudreaux 12:16

So just within the context of that particular orphanage, I continued to visit and kind of recognize that there was a lot of things that were happening that were not above reproach, so to speak, and long story short, there was a child that was there. He was two years old and he was very sick. And I knew that something was fishy when the orphanage director just let me take the child to go take him to the hospital and keep him with me for a while to have him heal and give him medicine because I'm thinking, "I have no paperwork on this child. I can't believe I have this." And granted, at 24 years old, that was a decision that was in and of itself a little bit challenging as well. But what happened from there is, when I began to realize that the child was getting better, and I returned them to the orphanage, the orphanage director actually asked me if I wanted to buy the child. And so from that situation, that's where I realized that this whole orphanage and the setup of a lot of these orphanages are basically for, not only trafficking, but taking children away from their families. And so sounding that alarm and having the American churches that were involved in this orphanage finally recognize and realized that what I was saying was happening, was really happening. It did open their eyes, and they started recognizing, hey, we've poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into this orphanage that's actually keeping children away from their families and it's not doing what we think at all. And so it kind of began this domino effect of, you know, recognizing that there was the Savior mentality and that was kind of blocking out the reality of what the orphanage was doing to these children.

L Lauren Pinkston 14:00

All right, so is it the injection of money? Is it the injection or power? What is it that's really driving this phenomenon?

M Megan Boudreaux 14:12

Um, I would definitely say that it's an injection of money. I mean, there's \$70 million per year

that go to orphanages in Haiti alone. And that's, you know, an outrageous number and that's honestly from the American church. They think that it's over \$100 million from just donors in general. So you've got all of this money being pumped into orphanages because people are thinking, the American churches are thinking, hey, you know, these children have nobody we need to support them. And then this is what happens. There's an explosion of orphanages, and it's still to this day, continuing having American churches think that building an orphanage is the solution. And I always say this, which is terrible, but um, like I've told churches this to their face. I've told boards, I've told so many people, I'm like, "If you build it, they will come." It's not like there's this need for orphanages and you know, there's all these kids that are just waiting to have an orphanage built. It's they have an orphanage built in their neighborhood and it's got power, it's got water, and it's got free schooling and so parents will bring their kids to the orphanage saying, "I love you so much. I want you to have an opportunity to get an education and to live in this space." And it's doing the exact opposite of what the church is thinking that they're doing.

L

Lauren Pinkston 15:36

I am going to keep asking questions because you're putting this into words in such a concise and articulate way - the thing that churches have been so resistant to hear. And when there is this injection of money, especially in a place where, you know, for decades or hundreds of years, actually, just the history in Haiti is a tragic one. Is this is this coming, is this being born out of assumptions that the American church is making when they see children playing in the street? Like who is telling the churches that they should build an orphanage? I guess that's yeah, like, let's get down to the, you know, okay, you travel you go on a short term trip, you see this thing like what is it inside of us that compels us to go to the elders or to the leadership or to the pastors of our churches and say, "We need to go back and build an orphanage?" What? Yeah, talk me through what you think at that?

M

Megan Boudreaux 17:10

I would say it's a very multifaceted answer because, like I said, I've lived in Haiti for almost 11 years. And, you know, culturally, there's a lot of things that are different. You know, I grew up in South Louisiana, you could run around outside barefoot, and it wasn't a big deal. You didn't have somebody saying, "Oh my gosh, do you need a pair shoes? Here they are." Well, you go to Haiti, and it's very similar. You know, kids are playing outside. They're having fun, they're playing in the water, they might not have shoes on and then you have this American mentality of like, they're not fully dressed. They don't have shoes on we need to give them a pair of shoes. And it really is the Savior mentality, of coming in, swooping in, and saying, "Oh, these children don't have what they need. Let us help them." Instead of asking the questions of what is needed. And I just remember, I mean, this has been like something on repeat, almost every six months for the last 11 years, of individuals coming to me and saying, "What is needed?" And my answer is always schools. There are not enough schools in Haiti. I have 600 children in our school and we have 100 more on a waitlist. There are not enough schools, good schools, in Haiti. And I'll say, "A school. Find a pastor or find a, you know, a school that's existing, find a group of teachers and support that school." And they'll say, "Oh, thank you." And then a couple months later, they started an orphanage. And it's just so hard because I'm like, you know, it feels good for them to start an orphanage to find some cute kids and to, you know, be able to take pictures and put their picture up on the internet and sponsor that child. But in reality,

that's going to last for what? 16, 18 years then they aged out and where's their family? Where's their connection to society? Where's their connection to their culture? And so what we're realizing now is we've got this huge problem of children aging out of orphanages and having no connection to their city, their family, their culture. And I feel like now churches, some churches, are saying, "Oh, well, we've sponsored this child and now they're 18 so now we need to sponsor him to go to this school or whatever it might be." And they're not recognizing that you have to be able to have some sort of bond or connection with your family or with you know, individuals in Haiti, and that's not happening.

L

Lauren Pinkston 19:30

Yeah, yeah, for sure. And just thinking about the phenomenon of this entire generation of kids that's grown up in an orphanage setting. I mean, we've raised an entire generation of kids in a culture separate from their native culture. Especially with foreigners who are running the orphanages, you know, that is going to layer on the complexities. It makes me think of complexity bias too and just how uncomfortable it is to sit with the layers of all that you're talking about here, because we just want to throw out a Bible verse "care for orphans and widows" and be done. What do you think? I'm not asking you a single question that I sent you ahead of time because it's just a fascinating case study. What is the call for us as followers of Christ, as people who are invited into a love for the image bearers of God? Like, what is our call and our duty when it comes to the complexities of loving our neighbor?

M

Megan Boudreaux 20:38

I mean, I think the problem or the root of this is, you know, I don't think there's any mal-intent when someone wants to start an orphanage. I'm not saying that they're going in there saying, "I can do it better than your family." But what's happening is, because they don't understand the culture because they don't understand what a family unit looks like in Haiti, they are unintentionally separating families. And I think until churches do their research and ask locals and they recognize that the American church is not going to be the Savior in this story, until they can recognize that the child-centered solution is not in taking children out of an environment that they deem unsafe or unfit or too poor or whatever words they want to use, until that conversation, and it's a heavy conversation, until that conversation happens, then this is just a cycle. Because we could talk about this for hours, we could go into a whole different, you know, domain of let's talk about disability or, you know, let's talk about children who are not cognitively able to school or have some sort of special need, whatever it is, and then that becomes the excuse to separate a child from their family. But our organization itself has seen special needs children with disabilities stay in their families and all they needed was some support. And the conversation changes from "Let me come and save these children and take them out of the situation" to "How can I support the family? What do you need?" And I feel like that's the number one question that the church has to be asking.

L

Lauren Pinkston 22:25

Well, that would require us to get messy with people and allow people to grow and develop their skills and their resources and that feels a little bit harder, Megan, than just writing a check. Alright, we've pulled with a lot of threads of the problem and I feel like you guys have

developed really incredible relationships and my hunch is that you have some incredible stories of how you've seen things work well. So let's start with just that invitation to engage in a bit more of a messy way with this phenomenon of orphans and vulnerable children. Rather than writing a check and saying, "Well, I've done my duty to protect an orphan today." Can you think of someone or a situation where someone decided to get into the messier parts of this with you and how that impacted their life?

M

Megan Boudreaux 23:29

Sure, yeah. We had, in the past, allowed visitors to come and it was very funny because when visitors would come they would say, "What do you need me to do?" And my answer would be, "Nothing. I don't need you to do anything." And I would ask them like, "What do you have to offer? What are you good at? What skill can you share with our community?" And people would say, "Oh, nothing. All I do is Zumba." And I'm like, "That's great. Let's do Zumba." And, you know, our kids would love being able to participate in a Zumba class in school or whatever it might be. And I think that there were several situations where people realized that they had skills that they could share instead of thinking they were coming in to swoop in and save people with their money or their resources or whatever stuff they were bringing. It changed the mentality from you know, let me do this for you to what can we do together? And I saw a lot of individuals become really connected to our community of Gracie, our community of Bellevue mountain, and they would come back often and it would never be let me come back and do this for them. It was always like, hey, I miss my friends. I want to be able to, you know, share life and do these things. And so, I think what we have seen just in our community is that relationship is the way this whole situation, this whole mentality, will change and I think that there's several situations with a lot of different case studies or situations that we've had. But ultimately, I would say, we have people who have come down or churches that have come down and they've recognized that they've come with one one idea, you know, hey, I would like to build an orphanage for your school. We've had that happen several times, or we'd like to do this. And then they leave and they say, "You know what? A lot of the kids were saying that there's not enough books to read in the library. The kids were saying they read all the books we'd like to support and send books." You know, they were starting to realize, okay, there are ways that we can support that's not going to be telling them what to do or also just swooping in and saving them.

L

Lauren Pinkston 25:40

Yeah, that's so good. That's so great. How have you seen... Well, why don't you tell us about your organization and your approach? And then I'll ask some more questions about that.

M

Megan Boudreaux 25:50

Sure. So our organization, Respire Haiti, was started back in 2011. And honestly, I did not go to Haiti with the intention of starting an organization. I really didn't, you know, people were like, how did you come up with the name and I'm like, because I was standing on a hillside and I was like, oh, you can breathe. What's the Creole word for breeds? Oh, it's respire. Like, it wasn't something that was very well, you know, planned. It just kind of, you know, organically happened and I always call it the domino effect in holistically helping the child because we



started with a feeding program, then we started with the school, then we had a child that had surgery and needed therapy and we started a therapy program and we started a medical clinic and so what we do is we do serve our community. But we serve these 600 children and we've had hundreds cycled through. We had our first graduating class last year, and we've sent children now to med school, to physical therapy school, to social work school, and it comes full circle because they're back working at Respire and building up our community and so I'm obviously a big proponent of education. I firmly believe that, you know, when our children, when our communities are educated, they're going to be the ones with the ideas that change the community for the better and I've seen it happen already. And we've had a lot of success in that. And so, not only do we do that piece of it, but my husband who I actually met in Haiti as well, he was on a visiting trip, so I can't bash visiting trips too much but... and so I met him in Haiti, but and then we got married in Haiti and lived down there together. He lived there for about nine years. He started a sports program and what we've seen with that is, two years ago we had our first female soccer player that got a full scholarship to the United States. And so now she's playing at Mississippi State University. She just got back from Australia this past summer and played on the World Cup team. We've got about five girls that play on the World Cup team for Haiti, and you know, we've seen that giving these kids opportunities. I mean, it's amazing! She's the first girl ever from Gracie to be on the national team. And, you know, now we have hundreds of soccer players. We have 600 soccer players that want to play and they all want to be like Nene and it's amazing, because that's the goal. The goal is to show them what's possible and say, you know, you can do this too, whether it be the doctors that are now from Gracie or the physical therapists or the soccer players. And so that's kind of our organization's goal and our mission.

L

Lauren Pinkston 27:07

It requires a shift in our thinking, right? To see this need in society, and to not view it from the perspective of "I'm going to go in and fix that problem" or "I have something that everybody needs" but to choose to see people with the agency and the equity in the community process to really give back and to just kind of be that reciprocal exchange. That's probably a... those things mean the same thing, but just to be able to see people not as our focus. Like you said, you've mentioned the savior complex several times and really an invitation to a relationship. How has that communication changed in the way that you communicate with churches over the last decade or so? Do you feel like churches are starting to understand that language and what do you wish that the American church could receive from you in your experience?

M

Megan Boudreaux 29:31

I would say that 50, 50 is probably, you know, a little bit too harsh. But I would say there's a large number of churches that have supported us that understand that we're walking with these families, we're walking with these children, we're supporting their education, we want to see them grow up in their families, and they support that and then there's a large number too that come in and they have an idea of what they'd like to do or what they'd like for Respire to participate in and when we say no. Then they're like, "Okay, we'll go find somebody else, peace out." You know, that's happened several times. And it's challenging because sometimes they even just drive down the road and, you know, I'm flabbergasted... I mean, in one year in Gracie, there was five orphanages that were opened by Americans. Five orphanages that were opened in one year and my heart just broke because I knew a lot of those kids had families and some of

those kids actually were in our school before and we had to pull them back. I mean, we were fighting for our kids to stay with their families because they had these orphanages that were shiny and new and opened. And so yeah, we've made some enemies. We have people that don't necessarily like what we do and how outspoken we are. But, you know, at the end of the day, this probably sounds harsh, but I'm not here to make friends with the American organizations. I'm here to focus on what's best for the children in Haiti and and Gracie and that's kind of how we have, you know, run our ministry.

 Lauren Pinkston 30:59

I cannot thank you enough for the stories because I've had people who have reached out to me and asked me, "How I would, you know, start an orphanage in X country." And I said, "I wouldn't." And I say, you know, well, a lot of times they'll just not engage with me again, but, you know, to be able to say, "I wouldn't, but here's why..." I think this is going to be the conversation that I point them to because you have walked so beautifully through this process of, like you said, sounding the alarm but also welcoming people and you're offering an alternative solution which a lot of people will criticize an issue but not offer an alternative and you you have offered an alternative for people. So I can't thank you enough for being so willing to openly share what you're seeing on the ground, the case studies that you've encountered, your willingness to ask questions and to say, "I'm not willing. I'm not going to talk about this, but I'm willing to do something." It's really awesome. How would you like for people to engage with you with Respire or for people to just learn more about what you guys are doing?

 32:06

Yeah, I mean, as we're talking about, you know, donations and giving and all of that and it is challenging sometimes because you feel like you are kind of fighting the good fight and knowing that these children need to stay in their families and get an education but then you've got kind of, you know, people who want to come in and save these children. And so I think for us, for Respire, our focus really is trying to build the best school that we can, trying to have the best teachers and we've got computer labs, we have sports programs, we have libraries, we have art classes, music classes. Like, we have these things in our school that we are proud of and we love when people come alongside and realize the importance of educating the community on what they can do. And so, you know, of course, I love to share the story of Respire. I love to share what we do. I love to share about you know, our students there. So I believe our website will be displayed or whatnot. So like I said, I've just loved engaging in conversation about it.

 Lauren Pinkston 33:09

That's awesome. Well, Megan and I have been friends on Instagram for a while, and I just love how Instagram allows us to find our people. Plenty of other apps that do that, but I like to focus on Instagram quite a bit and I know that you're responsive. And so if you guys are listening to this and you're thinking how can I take this conversation back to my church?, I know that Megan and her husband would be open to that conversation, we'll make sure that all of their

handles and links are below this episode in the show notes. And Megan, again, just thank you so much for the work of you and your husband and your entire family, because your kids have even helped in this education through on Instagram, so I'm grateful. I love it.