



APRIL 5, 2024
SAVANNAH COMMUNITY MEMORIES PROJECT
“FAITH IN ACTION” RESIDENCY
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWER: TOM KOHLER
DIRECTOR/CAMERA: ERIC DARLING
PRODUCER: MICKEY YOUMANS

SUBJECT: REV. BEN MARTIN



Ben Martin

09:06:28:05 [Eric Darling]: Okay. Thank you sir. And let Mickey get settled before we start,

09:06:34:11 [Tom Kohler]: You wanna ask a question? If you'll sort repeat the question, then go into the answer. So I'm gonna say for example. (Mickey: Okay. I'm good, y'all), you saying your full name and spelling it and you say, well, my name is Ben Martin. Okay. And, okay. Okay. Alright, we're good. We're good. Alright. Well good morning.

09:06:50:22 [Ben Martin]: Good morning.

09:06:51:22 [Tom Kohler]: I appreciate you being here.

09:06:53:04 [Ben Martin]: Thank you for asking Tom.

09:06:54:09 [Tom Kohler]: Well, my pleasure. Believe me. Why don't we just start, if you don't mind, tell us who you are and how you spell your name.

09:07:00:08 [Ben Martin]: Okay. My name's Ben Martin. Spell it just like it sounds. B-E-N-M-A-R-T-I-N.

09:07:07:06 [Tom Kohler]: And then let me ask you, do you have a pronoun that you prefer?

09:07:10:14 [Ben Martin]: He,

09:07:11:22 [Tom Kohler]: That sounds like a good pronoun to me.

Ben Martin

09:07:13:14 [Ben Martin]: Okay.

09:07:14:14 [Tom Kohler]: And then would you mind talking a bit about where you were born and kind of where you were raised and also how you were raised? And let's start with that.

09:07:25:03 [Ben Martin]: Okay. Home for me, Lyons Georgia, a small rural town about 75 miles west of Savannah. My grandmother, in fact lived in Savannah most of my growing up. So I spent a good bit of time back and forth here as well. But spent all of my growing up life in Lyons that was home, born there. My mother still lives there in the same house that I grew up in. And so that's kind of home how I was raised in a very just traditional small town family. Father was a mail carrier and a farmer,

09:07:57:12 family around livestock market. So it's kind of agribusiness world and that's kind of where I grew up and the world I grew up in.

09:08:05:15 [Tom Kohler]: Are you a public school kid?

09:08:07:17 [Ben Martin]: Part way. Part way Public school. Part way small Christian school.

09:08:12:17 [Tom Kohler]: And then your path to ministry?

09:08:15:03 [Ben Martin]: Path to ministry was second career. Went to college, came back from college, went to work for Georgia Power, worked six years for Georgia Power, you know, had a significant experience, I guess with Christ in my life and, and sort of coming to, I grew up in the church, but you know, very marginally involved as a young adult, but found my way back into church, kind of influenced by, strongly influenced by Savannah

09:08:46:06 girl Sally Nettles that grew up here, who came to be the youth pastor at our church and pulled my wife and I in to, to begin helping with students. And from that into a call into full-time ministry. Went back, went to seminary, and was ordained to the United Methodist Church. And that's been 36 years. I've been serving churches for 36 years since then.

Ben Martin

09:09:12:08 [Tom Kohler]: Oh my gracious. Well, let me just say all to everyone. You're wearing it eell, (Mickey: hang on a second.)

09:09:18:01 [Ben Martin]: Thank you. Just

09:09:18:18 [Mickey Youmans]: Do a little change little thing here. Okay. Lemme fix this for you. Like that. There we go.

09:09:25:05 [Eric Darling]: Just straightening you up for the camera.

09:09:25:18 [Mickey Youmans]: And when you also, whenever, whenever you ask a question and you answer if, if he says, you can say, I started with I or sort of begin it like it was you were telling the story without the, the, you know, as if Tom wasn't here. Yeah. As if Tom wasn't there. Like, okay.

09:09:41:06 [Ben Martin]: I,

09:09:41:14 [Mickey Youmans]: You know, so you, you, can you, that's what you got at beginning a sentence to be

09:09:45:22 [Ben Martin]: Okay.

09:09:46:15 [Mickey Youmans]: Right there. Or, or we, or however it is.

09:09:51:01 [Tom Kohler]: Did you know Sandy Clark?

Ben Martin

- 09:09:53:12 [Ben Martin]: Yeah, I had met Sammy a number of times in my young ministry. We
- 09:09:56:07 [Tom Kohler]: We're not, we're good? (Eric: We're good, Tom) we're on camera. (Eric: On camera. Yep, we're on.) Oh, I'm sorry. Let me ask you, you mentioned Sally Nettles is someone who was already active in the Methodist Ministry and that person influenced you. I go back and think about a man named Sammy Clark. Is that somebody you remember as well?
- 09:10:13:22 [Ben Martin]: I do remember Sammy, I remember him from early days of my ministry. At that point, he had moved, he was Chaplain at Oxford College and still took a lot of, but had spent time in the mission field. And so I heard him speak numerous times about his experiences at different United Methodist events, largely so. Didn't know Sammy well, just well enough to speak to him when I saw him.
- 09:10:36:02 [Tom Kohler]: Are there ministers that you have known through the years that were in the pulpit during the civil rights days that have stories that they told that kind of ring in your ear even to this day?
- 09:10:49:23 [Ben Martin]: Edward Carruth would certainly be one that was influential to me that, that walked in the church through some of those really difficult days at the church. And he, Jack Key would be probably be another, both of those men are deceased now, but just were influential in my ministry and I know that those were impactful days for them and difficult, difficult and challenging days for them.
- 09:11:20:18 [Tom Kohler]: And then let me ask you, if I could you, how long have you been at Wesley and what's your experience been like there compared maybe to some of the other congregations you served?
- 09:11:33:07 [Ben Martin]: Okay. I've been at Wesley Monumental United Methodist for 11 years. So it's, it's come and gone pretty quickly. I, it's been a great experience, Wesley, as a incredible church downtown. Urban traditional in style church. It was, it was very different experience for me. I grew up in a small rural town. Most of my pastoral experience were in more county seat style towns. I spent nine

Ben Martin

years in Springfield in Effingham County, just north of Savannah, 30 miles outta Savannah, but two

09:12:07:02 different worlds. Being at, at Wesley as a downtown urban church and being at Springfield as a county seat town, just outside of it. Spent eight years, been nine years in Springfield, eight years in Wrens, Georgia, another county seat style town, and served some small rural churches before that. So, so Wesley was a different experience. Wasn't sure how this sort of country boy would fit in in this more urban world, but haven't been

09:12:35:17 there 11 years, I guess we fit in okay. And, but it's been a good, good experience and, and it's been a, I think it's been a growth experience for me to be in a church that's far more diverse theologically, politically, socially. And that's been healthy, healthy for me and in growing my own view of God and the church and the church's place in the world.

09:12:58:23 [Tom Kohler]: And then in the other congregations that you served in other communities, was there a strong interfaith current that ran through the community? Or have you found that the interfaith current here in Savannah tends to be a little stronger, a little weaker? Is there any way to make a comparison about that?

09:13:16:21 [Ben Martin]: Serving in other places... I wouldn't say there was a strong interfaith, but there was a strong interdenominational connection so that in those small towns you had strong connections with the Baptist church or the Presbyterian church or the Lutheran church or the thing. Ministers had pretty close relationships. There were small communities, so everybody knew everybody. And you went from church to church, you did a lot of things together. What I find in Savannah has been there is more of an interfaith connection. For instance, some, you know, the, we are backdoor

09:13:47:19 neighbors with Mickve Israel and have had a beautiful relationship with them. In fact, as we, as I speak today, we're meeting in their fellowship hall every Wednesday night for dinner and, and bible study because we're doing renovation on our building. And, and we've done that back and forth with them over the years as, as well as sharing in ministry experiences with them through some shared ministries that other people are part of too. Things like Backpack Buddies and other ministries that Rabbi Haas and I are

09:14:16:09 both committed to in the community.

Ben Martin

- 09:14:19:16 [Tom Kohler]: Why don't we talk a little bit about what you've at, at, at, at Wesley. I mean, can you talk a little bit about the role that some parishioners play in the larger community, or how do you think about the role of, of congregation in community in your own mind and how has it really expressed as you see it congregationally at Wesley?
- 09:14:38:22 [Ben Martin]: At Wesley, kind of our philosophy for mission really has been that it doesn't have to be ours. So that we don't think we need to reinvent the wheel. There are plenty of effective organizations already doing ministry in multiple areas that we, we would want to impact the community in say, food scarcity or homelessness or veterans. And so all all of those ministries we feel like are things that we should help resource with people and, and with financial resources. So that's been our,
- 09:15:14:17 kind of our model of mission in the community as opposed to saying, Wesley has a homeless ministry, or Wesley has a food ministry, or Wesley has a ministry to veterans, or Wesley has what for whatever. 'cause there are plenty of people out there already equipped to do that, but they need our help. If you go to any, I I think any social service organization that's doing ministry in this community to people that are vulnerable, people in
- 09:15:41:07 need, you'll find Wesley members on their boards often chairing their boards that have had long, his... Wesley's had a long historical impact on the community through these organizations by our congregation's, participation in them. And that's what we encourage people to do. We encourage people to find a mission in the community to plug themselves into and can give you any number of those organizations that Wesley's had, Wesley members have had
- 09:16:07:23 significant impact on.
- 09:16:10:11 [Tom Kohler]: Well, that might be a good thing if, if you have examples of people and congregationally who are active in the larger community. I mean, I'd love to hear those examples and, and don't be shy.
- 09:16:22:00 [Ben Martin]: Yeah. Well I think, I think about Pat Monahan and his impact at Union Mission, former City Manager here, member at Wesley, who really helped Union Mission organizationally and get on its feet financially, but it goes way back from that. Elmo Weeks was on that Union Mission board decade for decades and decades and served in this community through Union Mission. I, we have a, a newer member, who's been here a few

Ben Martin

- 09:16:53:14 years, who was in the film industry, most of his career named Mark Lindsay, who is now the CEO of Boys and Girls Clubs of Savannah. And felt a call into that, that kind of service vocation as opposed to what he had always done previously in the film industry. The tiny house project here in Savannah, tiny houses for, for homeless veterans. We had numerous people participate heavily in that with our men. Nick Hitt, local contractor and
- 09:17:24:06 Wesley member took a great lead in that and, and organized our men around it. We had lots of talented men who, who did work around that Carl Pedigo. Even one of those men who spent an enormous amount of time building furniture for those houses. And we had lots of people plug in Tiny house, one of the most, I would think influential that just was kind of born out of Wesley, a man named Jack Reskoviak (SP?). Jack moved down here from New Jersey in his retirement and had volunteered a little bit in New Jersey with an
- 09:17:57:03 organization called Urban Promise. A guy named Bruce Main had started that. It's really a global ministry now, but he volunteered there a bit and it worked. It's, it's basically after school for inner city at risk children. Jack moved to Savannah as a 70-year-old retired guy and decided that there were, there were at-risk inner city children in Savannah that somebody needed to do something for.
- 09:18:20:14 [Ben Martin]: So Jack with little experience other than just a little volunteering, went out and began to raise money, went out to different places, set up a table in communities down off Fahm Street and other places and, and just invited people. If your kids need somewhere to be after school somewhere that'll be safe, somewhere to help them learn somewhere we can pour into their lives and develop their faith. And the ministry that was born of that is called Urban Hope. Urban Hope continues. Jack has been deceased for a number of years now, but Urban Hope continues
- 09:18:52:08 to be a, a really important ministry for afterschool care and summer care for inner city at-risk kids. Lots of Wesley members picked up, served in that. Cassie Beckwith was one of the ones that stepped up after Jack's death or while Jack was still living. But then after Jack's death, other people have chaired that board. Travis Thomas, Jason Pedigo is the chair now. So we, we, Wesley has played a huge role in that because it was born, sort of born out of Wesley, Urban
- 09:19:21:15 Hope was. We have people plugged in... The Living Vine, which is a ministry over in Midtown for unwed mothers that need have nowhere to go while they're pregnant, waiting the birth of their baby. And, and then some after. We've had folks that, that volunteer there every week to teach, we do their lawn care. Just, just all kinds of participation over there. This last year we've been doing a lot of work with food scarcity organizations

Ben Martin

- 09:19:53:13 that, that help feed people. So we weekly are collecting, collecting food. Nelle Bordeaux, our associate pastor is, she's our missions pastor as well. So she, she really could tell you more about these things than me. She, she is outstanding and leading people into getting involved in mission and, and ministry in the community.
- 09:20:13:18 [Ben Martin]: But, so she's led that drive. Our United Methodist Women... Backpack Buddies in the city as fed countless children over the years as part of that. And then of course we've been an integral part of Wesley Community Center, which was, which is a United Methodist ministry born in this community that serves women and children in the community. And so Wesley's had, you know, a really significant role. We're not far from them geographically, but it also is one of a ministry that was a part of our district that we are part of. So we've continued to support them
- 09:20:45:09 strongly financially, board membership, volunteering there, doing work on it.
- 09:20:51:07 [Tom Kohler]: And what, what role do they play and where are they actually physically located?
- 09:20:55:01 [Ben Martin]: What role do they,
- 09:20:55:23 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah, what what actually goes on in that building And where is the building actually located?
- 09:21:00:19 [Ben Martin]: Up on...
- 09:21:01:05 [Tom Kohler]: This is actually a physical space?
- 09:21:02:17 [Ben Martin]: Yeah, Wesley Community Center is up on Bull Street. That's, they have, they have a couple of different loca, they have two different locations, but... (Mickey interrupts)

Ben Martin

09:21:10:21 [Mickey Youmans]: Could you start that one again? Wesley Monu... Just, just start that again. 'cause Tom, you stepped on him in the middle of...

09:21:19:16 [Ben Martin]: Wesley Community Center is a long, long time, long-established ministry for women and children in the Savannah community. The main, the main building is up on Bull Street, not that far from our church at Wesley Monumental. And they serve, they have a preschool, a preschool that serves inner city children. They have, they do job training and interview practice for, for women who are, particularly single moms, is one of their, they do food distribution, just largely ministry to single

09:21:53:13 mothers and children. And,

09:21:56:04 [Tom Kohler]: And then let me, let me shift gears a little bit. I, I want to talk about something that happened recently in Savannah and just you folks, the church is on Calhoun Square and Calhoun Square has gone through a, a change recently and I'm curious, what was the impact of that change on the church? How did the church impact that change? And I'm, I'm offering this as an example of the relationship of congregation to

09:22:27:14 community, literally right outside its front door.

09:22:32:11 [Ben Martin]: I wouldn't say that we were an integral part of making that change, but we, we certainly have embraced, we embraced that change and we're a part of the celebration and dedication of the new name of the square. We participated in that, our choir sang at it, I at a prayer at the event. So we very much have embraced that change and are, are honored to sit on Taylor Square now at,

09:22:56:23 [Tom Kohler]: And then that leads me to ask about the, the, the politics of that. Were pretty hot politics. There's been some pretty hot politics around recently as well. And that was a congressional race where there were two people in your congregation who were running for the same seat. Help help me understand how that all works.

09:23:21:10 [Ben Martin]: Yeah. Political involvement, Wesley, we just say Wesley's a very politically diverse church and nowhere has that been more reflected than a recent congressional race where Buddy Carter, long incumbent serving that seat and Wade Herring, who at the time was our administrative board chair and them in the

Ben Martin

same congregation with each other for many years, run against each other. We naturally, as a congregation tried to not particularly take sides in that race, but really

09:23:54:09 to just, I thought, I found it really a rich thing, a good thing that our, that our congregation could have two people that are so different politically in the same congregation and be able to call that church home. Kinda what we tried to believe is that, you know, there's room for everybody at our church and we can love and and respect each other even if we disagree with each other. And that's kind of what we hope to be at Wesley. And that just the fact that those two folks running against each

09:24:24:00 other is that same race to me was a reflection of, of our diversity and our ability to hold a congregation together around that diversity.

09:24:33:08 [Tom Kohler]: One of the things that Wesley is sort of famous for right now as I understand it, is the number of young families that have come back and embraced a urban church. How has that happened? And the reason I'm bringing this up is it is the relationship of congregation to community.

09:24:49:03 [Mickey Youmans]: Just a second. When you move, excuse me, when you move the paper around, we can hear that. So try to just Okay. You know,.

09:25:00:07 [Eric Darling]: If you don't mind putting it down, it might..

09:25:01:16 [Ben Martin]: Yeah, yeah, sure.

09:25:02:10 [Mickey Youmans]: If you don't need it, you know,.

09:25:04:01 [Ben Martin]: I don't really need it. Thank you. Right. Okay. (Eric Darling: Okay. I'm sorry, continue, Tom.)

09:25:09:10 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah. I

09:25:13:03 [Ben Martin]: About young families and...

Ben Martin

- 09:25:14:22 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah. My, my, yeah. My understanding is that is that Wesley has a, a tremendous number of young families now, which is not usual sometimes for urban churches. I mean, how has that come about?
- 09:25:24:23 [Ben Martin]: Well, Wesley's had a pretty significant transformation over the last really, I'd say 17 years. 17, 18 years. One of the things that happened there, they started a child development center called Eli's Place. Eli's Place started off just as a kind of mother's morning out a day a week to try to offer something to a handful of young mothers that might've been in the church at the time, having no idea it would have the kind of growth it had. Now we have about 150 children that are a part of that. It's, it's a half day program, so it kind of doesn't
- 09:25:57:17 serve everybody, but it, it's drawn lots of young families to at least be exposed to Wesley. Families that probably wouldn't have driven downtown to a church like ours. Very traditional downtown church that it's not very convenient. They don't live downtown for the most part.
- 09:26:16:06 [Ben Martin]: And so that's one of the things is introduce young families there. And then our music, we, we have a real strong music program and we have a children's music program that families have found really attractive. And they're about a hundred, 160 or so children in that children's choir now in two different ages of children's choir that come downtown every week, make their way down there with no place to park and at the end of long days and have their children there. So it's been been pretty amazing to see. It's kind of graceful. People ask, how do we make
- 09:26:47:12 that happen? I, I'm not sure that we did it just kind of an act of grace that God gave us the responsibility for a whole lot of children and young families. And, and so we hope, you know, our goal is to, to help shape their hope, to shape their faith so they can live that faith out as they raise their children and they live in this community and that they have an impact on this community just as citizens of it and participants in it.
- 09:27:15:02 [Tom Kohler]: When you sort of close your eyes when you have a minute to just be quiet and personally reflect, and I'm imagining that some days there are not many of those minutes, but when that, I mean, when you think about this, just this phrase: "faith in action" as a phrase, what does that mean to you?

Ben Martin

- 09:27:35:21 [Ben Martin]: It means faith is not an idea that we believe. I think it's really, there's, there's a lot of difference in belief and faith. Belief to me has a, a ring of certainty to it. Faith is to be able to live with the uncertainty of things, with a lot of unanswered questions. But, but faith is trusting enough to risk it. It's to risk standing on something and working for something and living something out in spite of the fact that you may not have all the answers and you may have doubts
- 09:28:08:04 around those answers. But, so faith in action is what I believe about God and what I believe about myself as created in the image of God and my responsibility to be at work in, in a world that belongs to God, but that God is entrusted to us and that we're to make a difference in that world primarily to, to love people and to, to share the love of God with people
- 09:28:38:19 and help people understand the, the value that, that every person is no matter how vulnerable or broken or wounded or needy that they are, that they're, they're beloved and valuable and beautiful and cared for by God.
- 09:28:53:20 [Ben Martin]: And so faith in action for me is that, that we communicate that message by what we do. Not just, not just what we do on Sunday morning. Sunday morning. It might be where we draw the most people in, but it's, I don't wanna say the least important thing we do, but in, but, but in some ways it's not the most important thing we do. It, it, it is the place we hope to equip and inspire people to be living their faith out, to put in their faith in action in the community. So we need, we need
- 09:29:24:01 Sunday morning, we need worship, we need to gather people where they stop in the middle of the craziness of their schedules and busyness of their lives and, and recenter themselves around who they truly are so that they can go back out there and not forgetting that, not getting swept up in the pursuit of success and all the things that call us that, that tempt us to, in, in the, the culture. But rather to go back out there and feel like, you know, my faith is
- 09:29:54:07 essential to who I am and that that has to come through in every part of my life. Whether it's my vocational life and how I work, whether it's my political life and how I vote, whether it's the how I spend my money, what generosity I live with, how I use my energy and my time, which are both scarce. So that's, to me, when I think about faith in action, I, I see it not so much as people who are serving in our church, that's faith in action
- 09:30:30:07 too. But it's folks that are serving outside our church because of what they experience at our church. That's faith in action to me,

Ben Martin

09:30:41:22 [Tom Kohler]: I think we should stop there because that is faith in action. Well, thank you very much.

09:30:49:06 [Ben Martin]: Well thank you.

09:30:50:00 [Tom Kohler]: This is great. Well,

09:30:51:10 [Ben Martin]: Glad to do it. Yeah. One I didn't mention that I should have. We were talking about organ... You know, putting faith in action in the community and, and how that's impacted. Holly McCormick is a member of our church that got invited to participate in refugee resettlement ministry here through Inspiritus and has just found that to be a calling for her. And she is really, really inspired and pushed and encouraged our church to be a part of that. So we have furnished countless apartments for families

09:31:21:15 and move them in for refugee families that are coming here from all over the world to be, to be resettled and have a place to begin life again coming outta places of persecution and oppression. And, and so she's been a model for me of what, what faith and action looks like in this community for people that oftentimes folks look suspiciously at and, and wonder, you know, our whole issue of immigration and, but that, that's been her faith in action and, and really pushed us into a world of ministry that's been

09:31:55:12 really important.

09:31:57:10 [Tom Kohler]: Good. Cool. Thank you. Okay.

09:31:59:09 [Ben Martin]: Yeah.

09:32:00:01 [Tom Kohler]: You

09:32:00:07 [Eric Darling]: Good? Let's cut. That's

Ben Martin

09:32:02:00 [Tom Kohler]: Great.

09:32:03:02 [Eric Darling]: Thank you. Stand by for Mickey till we settle. We go. Okay. Anytime Tom.

09:32:20:11 [Tom Kohler]: Ben, I know that there are many people at Wesley who are involved in the community in many different ways. Might you share a few examples?

09:32:27:14 [Ben Martin]: Okay. One of the ministries that really has touched people's hearts at Wesley is called FAM, is Family Promise. Family Promise Man Form. Former Inner Faith Hospitality Network provides housing, temporary housing for circumstantially and temporary homeless families. And those families live in the church that the, the history has been, they would move from church to church. A church would host them for a week. They would, they would, we'd provide spaces for them to sleep meals for them. So

09:33:00:02 our church got involved in that. I've done that for a long time, several times a year. But then they began to grow their ministry in some more permanent or longer term kind of housing for people. And so some of our Wesley members got involved in build remodeling and building houses for them. And so we've been, I mentioned Nick Hitt earlier on Tiny Houses, he and Carl Pedigo that worked heavily on that. I've also worked heavily with a lot of other men out of our church to build two, two houses for Family

09:33:30:01 Promise that have been able to place families in for longer term period of time and not be in this process of moving back and forth from church to church to church. And lots of people have participated in Family Promise, we've raised significant money for them and we continue to provide meals quarterly for them and work on housing situations for them providing furniture and other items.

09:33:53:10 [Eric Darling]: Well, thank you for being with us.

09:33:54:21 [Ben Martin]: Thanks. Alright, good. Thank you guys. My foot's back awake and that's good too. Give the time you needed. Yeah, that's that.