

Season 4 Episode 5: Adam Ward on Sharing the Stories of a Place

Speaker 1 [00:00:00] The common thread I would see the most is what was the need I was uniquely positioned to meet. And there's so many people that their story was written for where they are now. Welcome to the Embedded Church podcast, where we share stories about reweaving the connections between place, the built environment and the mission of God.

Speaker 2 [00:00:30] Season four of the Embedded Church podcast is produced in partnership with the Ormond Center at Duke Divinity School. The mission of Ormond Center is to foster the imagination, will and ability of congregations and communities to be agents of thriving.

Speaker 1 [00:00:43] I'm Eric Jacobsen.

Speaker 2 [00:00:45] And I'm Sarah Joy and will be your host on today's episode of the Embedded Church podcast. Hey, all, here we are again in part two of Season four, and we are moving on into place. So our interview with Amy Sherman, we focused on Siloam and now we're going to unpack the place a bit more with somebody who's practicing that on the street. We have Adam Ward, who hails from Columbus, Ohio. So I'm excited to have you all hear about him.

Speaker 1 [00:01:19] Yeah, I'm excited as well. So, Joey, I what I particularly like about Adam as our emblematic place representative today is Adam's got a podcast, but unlike a lot of podcasters who want to sort of sweep the market and whatnot, Adam seems really content to keep his podcast hyper local. He really wants to talk about Columbus for people who live in Columbus, which is such a great way of thinking about a place. He really wants people to love their town and love the ministry that's going on in their particular town, which is kind of all about place.

Speaker 2 [00:01:50] Totally. I agree. And I think what it reminds me of is Chris Elisara in episode two, when we were talking about place with him, he brought up that book, Our Towns, which it was a couple that I think traveled across America and did some exploratory work about what towns were thriving and what towns were struggling. And one of the main things that they really discovered, the commonality among the towns that were thriving, was that they all had this civic story that they were very aware of and that they were actively telling. And so that civic story actually birthed hope and love of the town among its residents and really created just a dynamic there that made these towns much more flourishing. So I think it's cool to hear Adam telling the stories of Columbus and he effectively is creating this resiliency for Columbus, whether or not he's aware of it. I think that's really cool.

Speaker 1 [00:02:40] I love that as well. Yeah, he definitely holds that story out and helps people celebrate their city. The other thing that's cool about this interview is he talks about how ministry tends to thrive best in a particular culture. He's not a big fan of best practices only because oftentimes the practice that succeeding is succeeding because it's been birthed out of a particular culture and it's going to work only in that culture. That's exactly what we've been talking about with Wendell Berry's bucket imagery, that the soil of Kentucky is going to be different from the soil of St. Paul or the soil in Tacoma, and things are going to grow differently in those different soils in the same way ministry is going to succeed in a particular context and maybe not cross over to another context just as well.

So that's really good for Adam to be focusing in on what's working in particular contexts. So anyway, I'm excited to share this with you all.

Speaker 2 [00:03:29] Me too. Let's get it rolling.

Speaker 1 [00:03:31] Sounds great. I'm excited to be here with Sarah Joy and our guest, Adam Ward today from Columbus, a fellow podcaster who's joining us on our podcast. So welcome, Adam. Good to have you on the show, man. I'm thrilled to be on. I love your guys work. And thanks for having me on the show. Absolutely.

Speaker 2 [00:03:59] Yeah, I was telling Eric, but he's raising the stakes because he brought another podcast and

Speaker 1 [00:04:04] part of his life professional,

Speaker 2 [00:04:06] like he's going to totally show up, Eric. But here we go.

Speaker 1 [00:04:10] I wish we could show a picture of his setup.

Speaker 2 [00:04:11] There is. I know it's really different.

Speaker 1 [00:04:14] So we are definitely out of our league, but we're honored to have you with us today. So in all honesty, I'm pretty excited about what you're doing. And I think it's such a great idea and it's something other churches I think other community leaders could pick up. So I'm excited for people to find out about it. Thank you. First of all, tell us a little bit about the origin of the Columbus podcast. Tell us about how that got started. Yeah, I know. So I was a triathlete and for many years, and so I stopped when I stopped racing formally triathlon, I kept riding my bike and I was on my bike one day and I just felt like God said, hey, why don't you create a show that talks about what faith leaders are doing in Columbus and let them talk about it. And so I said, OK, I don't know what I'm doing, but I'll figure it out. That's actually where the origin came from. I can show you exactly where on the map I was on my bike at the time.

Speaker 2 [00:05:06] That's that's amazing, because I would say I am the same way in terms of ideas come to me on my bike at some of my best time for just processing things and being like, OK, and do you want to take me

Speaker 1 [00:05:17] this awesome guy commute on my bike? And it's literally point seven miles. I don't have enough time on the seat to actually get any great ideas. So that's probably explains

Speaker 2 [00:05:28] why you're really stymied in that area.

Speaker 1 [00:05:30] I got to get a little longer.

Speaker 2 [00:05:31] Is this a full time gig then that you're doing now or is this on the side? What does that look like for you

Speaker 1 [00:05:36] know, so that's funny because I don't actually have a full time anything right now. I would say I'm full time Columbus' right now. And the podcast is one of the things that I do. And but actually everything that I'm doing for my city right now, I do based on my experience. And it's it's not paid. This is all volunteer effort.

Speaker 2 [00:05:57] So what kinds of guests have you had on the podcast? You talked a little bit more about the format and what that looks like. Kind of. And is it a weekly podcast or how often do you release episodes?

Speaker 1 [00:06:06] Well, I like to do it every week, but it's probably averages about once every three weeks right now. But we here in Columbus like to think of the big C. Church in three different spheres. Overlapping Venn diagram is the congregation per church or nonprofit ministries. And in the marketplace, in the marketplace. Sometimes we talk about civil servants being in that or sometimes not in that. But our guests go across all of those. We've had social agency leaders, you know, small church pastors, large church pastors, ministry leaders, business owners. If you're a Christian leader doing something cool in Columbus, I'm trying to track you down.

Speaker 2 [00:06:48] Has it become a competition in Columbus? Who gets invited to your pie list?

Speaker 1 [00:06:54] Yeah, most of the time I'm open to almost anybody. I just don't like to get into questionable doctrine or stuff. That's that's a away from faith based issues. But no, there's no there's no competition. That's awesome. So what would you say is the purpose of your podcast? What do you do after we try to do, a, really inform about what's happening and celebrate what's happening here in Columbus with the believers that are leaders? And it's just easy to know what's happening there. It's hard to know what's going on in Columbus. We have over two million people. And, you know, it's a big city that's a much bigger city than I would have guessed. Twenty third in the US. So it's it's a big and almost a couple of thousand churches, eleven hundred evangelical churches and a bunch of mainline. And so, I mean, it's a big spot to cover. So I mean, even with me scratching the surface just under one hundred. Yes. It's less than just a fraction of who we have here.

Speaker 2 [00:07:53] Right. In terms of your audience then, is it mostly pastors and churches that are tuning in or all across the nonprofit sector?

Speaker 1 [00:08:02] Yeah, I like to think of the leaders in those three spheres as being the the primary target. And those are the ones I, I probably get the most feedback from. And and then the secondary would be, hey, there, probably someone in their faith who's looking to that next, or they're involved in multiple things and they don't just see themselves associated with one congregation or one nonprofit. And then we've got people that drop in from all over the US. But and I'll respond to them. But my targets. Columbus. Yeah. Yeah, that's cool. So it's really it's really focused on the local. It is that's really what have you enjoyed most about producing the podcast, what's been most fun for you? Well, I'm curious by nature. So just meeting incredible people and hearing the just I mean, miraculous stories behind how they got to where they are, you know, former felons, former people who were trafficked, leading anti trafficking, judges who have changed policy based on purpose driven life. I mean, just just crazy stuff that that you would say, you know, I never would have known this had I not talked deep with this person. And that I think that's a big deal, the preinterview. But then that also helps that when I get in the interview, I can act like I kind of know something. But, yeah, those those incredible stories are behind every single person. It's just I love it. That's so cool. That's so fun. Especially I love that combined with the local focus, it's like these people are driven by their church or you've seen the sign but have no idea the incredible stories behind the ride. And then you just find out

Speaker 2 [00:09:40] the thinking about the fact that it's so hyper local, can tell us a little bit about Columbus and give us an orientation to that context. You told us it's a city of two million, but I don't know much past that yet.

Speaker 1 [00:09:52] Yeah, I mean, it depends on how you define Columbus. So there's the city, there's Franklin County, there's the seven counties, there's 11, 17 year, depending on how it all gets. So somewhere between two point two and two point five million people geographically, not very exciting, kind of flat, a lot of agriculture. We do have some areas and we've got a couple of rivers that flow through here that have created valleys. But this is a former industry town and we've been slowly moving into high tech and we have some great health care here, great health care startups. We actually have a pretty good startup scene. Obviously, it's a college town with Ohio State and the Buckeyes just north of downtown, a bunch of really nice suburbs. And it's like, you would imagine a Midwest city. And the people here, I think for the most part, we love Columbus. Is there anything that you would consider like a quintessential Columbus experience? It could be anything. Like you're just you're with a with a bunch of friends and you're like, this is so Columbus, like what we're doing. No one is going to be a Saturday in the football season. So tailgating know, I remember when I first moved here and people were like, this is a special time of year. I don't do stuff on Saturdays and that's quintessential Columbus. But we have just a bunch of things. We have world class zoo here. The late Jack Hanna was heavily involved in that zoo and just some historic places around town. I think our metropolitan statistical area covers over three thousand square miles. So there's a bunch of places to go and see stuff you could be downtown taking in the topless 20 minutes later, you can see a pair of bald eagles nesting along the Atlantic River. It's just really cool. Wow, that's awesome.

Speaker 2 [00:11:36] The same thing here in Minnesota in terms of getting to see bald eagles along the river. It's such a it never gets old either. It's just not. There's an eagle.

Speaker 1 [00:11:45] Let's have a small dog then. Way to take it down. And I thought, wow.

Speaker 2 [00:12:01] So it's been really fun talking about Columbus and getting a little more oriented to some of the things that you've got going on there, and part of that discussion is really because we're focusing on place and the value of place in this season of our podcasts. And so I'd be curious to hear from you. Do you feel that your podcast has really influenced people's perspective and value of Columbus as a place? And how have you seen that play out,

Speaker 1 [00:12:26] this Columbus Midwest town? We have a lot of pride and stuff that succeeds in our city, whether it's covering my meds, getting an IPO, being bought, if it's the Buckeyes winning a national championship or the Big Ten championship or just someone from our area getting in Congress like we celebrate that. So I think people that listen to this podcast and hear when we have so many Columbus natives on the podcast that it just makes them love their town even more. Hmm.

Speaker 2 [00:12:57] Yeah. Do you think it creates an identity that maybe I mean, it sounds like there is an identity there already, but adds to that identity and an even stronger way?

Speaker 1 [00:13:06] I do. And I think it's it's kind of bittersweet because some of the podcasts cover issues. I mean, Ohio's number two in the nation for opioid, we fell from four to five and human trafficking. Do you learn about those things? But then you learn about

the incredible things that people are doing to combat that stuff. So some of it's Pandora's box. If you get into an episode, you may not even know about it. And then all of a sudden you're trying with the person because of what they're what they're doing. Right. Do you think there's some sense of best practices for people here, like, oh, that's a really cool program. We should either help out with that or we should get something started like that, you know, in our neighborhood. Do you think there's some encouragement that way? Yeah, I'm I'm always so leery of copying best practices because there was an entire culture that built that best practice. Right. And a framework that was in place to support that. And I do think some of the best practices can be translated from one institution to another. I think for us, I probably would like to push more around. If you see someone passionate doing well in something, how can your organization partner with them and you share people or space or resources to grow together, especially church wants to do a food pantry or they want to get into substance recovery or prison ministry. There's so many organizations out there that do stuff like that. Of course, the churches, a lot of pastors will say, oh, I'd like to try that and do stuff. But for the most part, I really would like them to connect contribute to each other's causes. Right. Well, I was thinking sometimes like a particular culture, you know, it's distinctive to your area and some things are going to work better in that culture. There's a church across town from us that is doing Bible studies for women. And we've done, obviously, women's Bible study Wednesday night at seven o'clock or whatnot. But this one church did like a nine p.m. Bible study for women. And we're like, wow, that's crazy. And like, oh, it's totally thriving because somehow that work that the moms put their kids to bed, their husbands would stick around and, you know, just be there on the premises. But then they could go at night and do this. And I was just thinking, someone who knows that that's not geographical culture. That's like a demographic culture. Still, that was other churches like. Oh, yeah, why why have we not thought about doing a nine p.m. Bible study for four moms? Yeah, I know. I certainly hear that. And I get a lot of emails, a lot of text. Hey, I heard so-and-so on this on this podcast. Can you connect me with them? Honestly, my my my favorite thing probably is when I find out later that someone I connected ended up doing some great project together and then they tell me or they send me the results of that project and I'm like, that was this person was on a guest of the podcast. I connected them and they went and they love it.

Speaker 2 [00:15:56] So we're almost mapping out the social networks of Columbus in so many ways. And that's amazing.

Speaker 1 [00:16:03] It does help do that. Yeah. Yes, that's really very cool. Yeah. So I was going to ask that, but you already answered it. Maybe you've got more to say about that. Do you have you seen some, like, cooperation happen between ministries that get highlighted on your show? Yeah, I mean, obviously there's a bunch of people that don't want to cooperate. They've got their hands full doing what they want to do it. There are a lot of people that are looking for opportunities that are feeling it. The call to that and don't know how. I don't even know where to go. And all of their peers don't know either maybe their mentors in a different state because they went to seminary in Texas or California and and then so they don't really have something here. And yeah, I.

Speaker 2 [00:16:44] Do you have any examples of ones that have been particularly striking, well-respected?

Speaker 1 [00:16:51] I guess the one I'd like to think about is the substance abuse recovery program that we have here in town called. The refuge I had Tom Thompson on very early in the podcast. And we were down in his facility and what some people call rough part of town, but certainly trafficking hot spots, and then I connected one of his staff

members with a lady who does data analysis and they they went and did this. I don't know how long the program was, is months. And they created this report that showed the statistics for a kingdom based return on investment and it showed how effective the program was. And people had all these infographics in it. And if those people had never been connected, they they wouldn't have been able to share that. And now that report's being circulated among all these nonprofit leaders who say we want to have something like that to the donor base loves it. So I think that's probably one that is excited me the most because it's a for profit business led by Christian. It's a nonprofit business, not one not business, but nonprofit ministry led by a Christian and trying to help the city thrive. That's awesome.

Speaker 2 [00:18:04] What I hear in those stories, to have just the ways that you're helping the church, you're connecting people to utilize their gifts for the church and for nonprofit and for kingdom work in ways that maybe they hadn't thought about using before. And it's like outside, there's a lot of the standard church approaches sometimes to how we encourage people to utilize their gifts. I feel like this is a creative way to connect people and have them thinking outside the box.

Speaker 1 [00:18:38] So that's one of the themes, something we're trying to kind of keep before us is we want pastors to ask better questions, often at times as pastors, we think about, you know, what is success? Oh, it's having more people at my church or having a bigger budget or just some things that maybe don't line up super well with the kingdom. So thinking about the guests that that make the cut for you, the ones that you feel like have a story worth telling, do you have a sense of what questions they're asking? What questions are they asking that make them noticeable to you? I would probably say the common thread I would see the most is what was the need? I was uniquely positioned to meet. I love that. Yes. There's so many people that their story was written for where they are now. Yeah. I love that they're very particular, their gift mix, they're context, they're the community of their church community, their church community, and then that that the hunger, the need that's out there, that how those things connect. And now I think I think there's certainly was with me for a long time a fear that if we asked God, what does he want us to do? Is going to tell us to go do something crazy we don't enjoy. Yeah. And, you know, for 15 years, I've been a consultant to very large organizations and a pattern engineer. And I thought, well, I never get to use my problem solving skills, but this Port Columbus thing and it's just a different type. I'm not designing individual parts or talking with division heads, but it's very similar in how my mind works. And if people would just be willing to say what is it and not think about the paradigm that exists today, they're probably going to be happy. That takes a certain kind of person to have that kind of open imagination

Speaker 2 [00:20:26] takes a lot of courage.

Speaker 1 [00:20:27] That's cool that you're showcasing folks that have those. Yeah, those attributes that are really commendable. It makes their conversation so easy. A lot of people are afraid to come on the show and they tell me and then they get on in there like that. Was it? That was great. I didn't even know and. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Speaker 2 [00:20:45] Have you found that by being on your show, they are encouraged more in what they're doing?

Speaker 1 [00:20:52] Yes, that's my goal, is to get them to not even know what's happening for them to lose themselves in their story. Because we've already talked and I

know it's incredible. So how do I try to extract that amazing part out? And if they have emotional parts for their emotions to be felt, they're usually jazz. They've got another thing that they can show to donors or employees or people who say, hey, you're kind of a concise look at how we got to where we are today.

Speaker 2 [00:21:22] Yeah, yeah. That's really cool. It's like a service you're providing to them with your podcast.

Speaker 1 [00:21:27] Yeah, just a little side bonus,

Speaker 2 [00:21:29] giving them something that they can walk away with to grow their vision and their mission. That's really cool. Yeah.

Speaker 1 [00:21:35] So I'm hoping that some of our listeners get inspired by what you're doing and think, oh, we could do this here. There's great stuff happening in our neighborhood, our city, that that could be shared with other leaders in our city. What kind of advice would you give someone who's thinking about maybe starting a podcast for St. Paul or for Tacoma or something like that?

Speaker 2 [00:21:56] Eric, you're not leaving this podcast,

Speaker 1 [00:22:00] just theoretically for Tacoma, for St. Paul, Luke? I would say just do it. I know there's a lot of OK, everyone has a podcast these days and or I don't have the equipment or I don't know how I'm going to do. You'll grow with it. Just start it and do it. I think the first 10 episodes are kind of the scariest part of it. If you record one or two and you can't get past that, then maybe there's an issue. But just say, hey, I'm going to try five or ten and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. But yeah, go for it. How do you how would you recommend they find their first couple interviews? Yeah, I would make a list of people in the city they respect and and maybe they know them. Maybe they don't know them if they don't and they know someone who's maybe one connection away leverage that connection. You know, I certainly name dropped and the first set of people I brought on. And then it builds momentum because it's like, oh yeah, we've had so-and-so on the show and so and so on the show. And they're like, oh well OK. Yeah, yeah. I don't even have to send an intro letter anymore. That's awesome. That's just a couple of things I would say to to get it going. Here's what I would say, keep it simple, the simpler you can make it, the better it goes with the equipment so you can do it face to face recordings on an iPhone. You can buy one of those mikes that plug in the bottom. You can literally record it with your computer Mike Gecan headphones like we are on Zoom right now. Keep it simple the schedule and keep it simple. I have driven to dozens and dozens of locations and done it wherever we want it. Outside rooftop park office. Just make it easy. Content trumps quality every single time.

Speaker 2 [00:23:48] Yeah, that really is true. I listen to some pretty crappy audio quality because.

Speaker 1 [00:23:53] Because you like that, right? Yeah.

Speaker 2 [00:23:57] So would you do anything differently if you started all over in a new city?

Speaker 1 [00:24:03] Oh man. Yes, I would keep the format the same. I think it works really well, but I would be far more intentional about getting every sphere in early. OK,

what do you mean by Sfeir, the congregational, the church in the marketplace and government leaders? I focused a lot on pastors at the beginning, which I think was good, but. The diversity across all of the different areas was so much better if I go back and look at all of the photos of the guests that have been on the show, it is a cornucopia of humanity. And I think getting outside the pastor's include them. But getting outside will probably be the thing that I would would do first earlier on. So you kind of step earlier on. Yeah, that's awesome. That's great.

Speaker 2 [00:24:54] If our listeners wanted to tune in to the four Columbus' podcast, do you have a couple of episodes that you recommend they start out with?

Speaker 1 [00:25:01] Oh, man, that's a good. So I'm in the process right now of renaming everything by subject. So instead of it being a subject and we just have so many different subjects that I would say to scroll through and pick a topic that is meaningful to you. I think the one that certainly has the most listeners is Steve Comb's first episode that he was on the show where he talks about going from a really tough trouble hood to being a, quote, biker pastor to launching a church on a side of town that most church planners wouldn't want to be in. And then just the tremendous growth and impact that he's had on the community, his church leave a mark and that one's been good. Put man to pick one out who I

Speaker 2 [00:25:49] can listen to more than one. Just where do they start? Also, I want to hear from you. Where can our listeners access your podcast?

Speaker 1 [00:25:59] Yeah, I mean, we're on iTunes. Spotify. If you've got Amazon Prime, you can just ask Alexa to play it. So just say for Columbus' podcast and that'll come up on whatever podcast listen or you're using.

Speaker 2 [00:26:13] All right. Listeners also tune in and be great.

Speaker 1 [00:26:17] This has been great. Thank you so much, Adam. So fun to hear more about your passion, what you're doing. And I, I really do hope some of our listeners will take up the challenge and start telling the stories of their own communities, because I know, like you've experienced, there's just so much going on that we don't see because we're busy with our own garden we're trying to work on. And we might be doing some cool stuff in our own neighborhood. But citywide, there's so much we're missing. Yeah, and in your city could be small. I mean, I have friends that are doing similar podcasts in City. One hundred thousand. Look, I'll make this offer. If you're a listener out there and you want to get one started in your city and you want to talk to me more, just get my contact information from Eric or sheer joy and I'll reach out and help you if you want that. So that's I would love to see more cities doing it.

Speaker 2 [00:27:01] That's so cool. And I think what's so great about it is that doing this type of work, you're not necessarily going out and doing all of these efforts. You simply are highlighting and exposing the good work that's already. And I think that's such an important role that people in the church can play that they don't think of oftentimes that they can play that role

Speaker 1 [00:27:19] as modern pride in this episode. Newspaper article on audio. Yeah, so cool. Awesome. Well, thanks so much. Thanks, Joy. Recently, I published an essay with my partner at first Imane films entitled We Bring the Bonfire. You know, say we reflected on the power of story as we had experienced it, producing a film festival about

placemaking and urbanism for the United Nations 10th World Open Forum in Abu Dhabi in February 2020 in the section entitled We Build the Cities We Imagined. We wrote the following. Scholars tell us that stories sink deep into our bones and picture for us what constitutes the good life. We then lean into those stories as characters in the narrative we've absorbed. If that's true, then where are people getting the stories and narratives that inspire? The cities we are imagining, designing and building today at the day, city builders influenced by stories that inspire them to design and build cities and communities in ways best fit for human thriving. Or are they under the influence of bad stories and distorted ideas that can lead to inferior places being designed and built, places that lead to loneliness, inequality and ruin? We can only do what we dream, we can build only what we can imagine, so we better have good stories to kick, start and shape our imaginations. And that brings us to the bonfire. Lit a fire at a social gathering and without prompting, people with beaming smiles will soon be gathered around and the stories will be flowing. Anthropologists tell us this is no accident. It's deeply ingrained from gathering around fires and groups for protection, cooking, warmth, socializing and telling stories that build our social and cultural bonds. A fire is civilizing technology. At often a film festival was the bonfire. People from all around the world gathered to watch the flickering light and share stories. They left the hearth with heads and hearts full of inspiration, new connections and renewed courage to make a difference. This podcast, and for Columbus Asalam inspiring bonfires, and like Adam says, you, too can light a bonfire telling real and good stories to kick, start and shape imaginations for your city and for your neighborhood if you've been stirred by this episode. Take up Adam's challenge and start for for Columbus podcast in your city. Or perhaps start hosting a neighborhood open mic storytelling night in a funky neighborhood storefront and watch what happens. It may not seem like it, but you'll be planting serious, placemaking seeds, the Gogu water and grow. Finally, I want to make a very special Ormond Center announcement that is very fitting for this episode. In spring twenty twenty two, we are launching the Ormond Center Better City Film Festival. You can learn more about the film festival at our website, including how to submit a short film and about the warm up online screening we will be hosting this fall to give you a taste of what's to come in. Twenty twenty to check it out. And thanks for listening.

Speaker 2 [00:30:57] Thanks for tuning in to another episode of the embedded church podcast. Be sure to check out the episode show notes for links to resources and other helpful information related to this episode. If you'd like to connect with us to share comments or ideas about the work we're doing. We'd love to hear from you. You can send us an email at info@embeddedchurch.com or leave a voice message on our feedback line by dialing seven six zero five to seven three to six zero followers on Instagram Embedded Church podcast or visit our website www.embeddedchurch.com. Finally, thank you to our Stephen for partners at Ormond Center and to all of our faithful listeners and supporters who have helped us make it to Season four, we are honored and encouraged until next time. Be well.