

## Season 4 Episode 7

**Speaker 1** [00:00:00] Clearly, the most beautiful building in Hollywood now that is owned by a church, and I think that is the church's role to take back the things that, again, Satan and sin and all these negative things have really stolen from God's people at community.

**Speaker 2** [00:00:20] 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 3** [00:00:29] 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 2** [00:00:43] I'm Eric Jacobsen.

**Speaker 4** [00:00:44] And I'm Sarah Joy and will be your host on today's episode of the Embedded Church podcast. Eric, I'm excited to share with our listeners this most recent interview that we did with Cynthia Wallace, she is the executive pastor and the director of the Oasis Project, which comes out of Bible Center Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And she is just a fire hydrant of ideas and excitement around her church and what they're doing there in the local neighborhood. And one of the things that really stood out to me in our interview with her is that they really are holistic in their approach to solving problems and making their neighborhood a better place and digging into the good things that are happening there as well.

**Speaker 2** [00:01:36] Yeah, I love that. I love her realism. You know, she looked at a problem and really thought about, OK, why can't these kids get to school and OK, they need transportation. We need to set up a transportation ministry. And she wasn't like pie in the sky, dewy eyed faith. But she on top of that realism, she has a really strong faith. It's a really exciting call story of how a pastor prayed for a specific thing in a specific name that that came about. And this church is not huge. I mean, this hundred and twenty person church she described as a Gideon church because this small church can do mighty things. And I thought that was a really neat combination of seeing her faith, combined with super sophisticated understanding of some of the complexities of her neighborhood and the dynamics that needed to be addressed in order to bring Shalom in that context.

**Speaker 4** [00:02:25] Yeah, and I think on top of that, what stands out to me, and that is just their willingness to take risks, and particularly for them, some of the ways that they've done that is proactively buying properties in their neighborhood. And so just to seeing this small church go out on a limb and purchase these properties and consider how they might use them for the good of the neighborhood is really cool.

**Speaker 2** [00:02:45] Absolutely. You know, I feel the need to bring it back to Wendell Berry for your sake.

**Speaker 4** [00:02:49] And I appreciate that.

**Speaker 2** [00:02:51] I think you can't quite get the bucket analogy to connect the dots. But I do see, Cynthia, that a lot of ways thinking like an organic farmer, thinking about every element of the field that her church has been placed in and not thinking of each of

the elements in seclusion from each other, but how they interact with each other and how transportation connects with education and how food connects with entrepreneurship and all these different things. And she's got programs in place to address each of these things and the solutions that she's coming up with. It doesn't just help one area, but they kind of spill over in other areas. So it's I love the holistic organic feel of how she's approaching the neighborhood. All right, we're here today with Cynthia Wallace from the witness project and Cynthia, we are so excited to have you a guest on our show today.

**Speaker 4** [00:03:45] Yeah, welcome.

**Speaker 1** [00:03:46] Thank you. Thank you.

**Speaker 2** [00:03:48] All right. So we were going to we're going to be talking a lot about the Oasis project. But just to give the back story, tell us a little bit about your journey. How did you get to to the Oasis project? What were you doing before you got involved with this project?

**Speaker 1** [00:04:00] I think it really is my relationship with my husband that got me there. We were living in the Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti area of Michigan. My husband was a young adult pastor at our church there. I was actually the principal of the church, a school I had founded, a school with our church there. And then my husband's grandfather died and his grandfather was the founding pastor of the church he grew up in here in Pittsburgh. And he just felt that God was calling him back to Pittsburgh to pastor that church. And so I said to him, really, what's the worst thing that could happen? Right. We're just going to do it. And so we uprooted our four kids and moved to Pittsburgh. That's what got us. The Bible Center and Bible Center has always been a very community focused church. We kind of came in, got started, and literally our first ministry was picking up trash. Like, wow, the the community there a lot of needs. Where should we start? Let's start with just cleaning up stuff. And that's what we did literally. We did that every Saturday for two years. Just pick the trash. We prayed with people. We knocked on doors. Hey, remember, Bible Center? Bible Center had been in the community since nineteen fifty six, but the congregation had kind of died down a little bit. But just saying we're here, we're here for you. And then after that things kind of took off. And I think it was God's direction and our demonstration along with the members here of like we don't know what to do but God, we're going to follow you. And so we do know we can pick up trash, we can pray for people. These are things we did know to do. And then that kind of just burst. The Oasis project, which is our community and economic development division one ministry led to another and another. And so that was just kind of the founding of the Oasis project when we were leaving our church in Michigan. He prayed over us standing up and he said in that prayer, you're going to go and you're going to create an oasis in that community. And it was years later that one of our friends that happened to be working the sound booth found this old recording of that prayer. And by that time we had said this was the Oasis project. Will God really, I guess, this planet in our spirits? Because we didn't remember that our pastor said, you're going to go and create an oasis. And it was just this amazing confirmation when our friends hear that recording that that's exactly what you've been covid this community to do.

**Speaker 2** [00:06:23] That's that's so cool. I let you know, we've been working a lot with Jeremiah. Twenty nine seven this year, the welfare of the chillum of the place to which you've been called, that's been really rich imagery. But most of the folks that we're talking to don't have as clear a story as you do about that call that came so specifically. I love that part of it. You don't always think about the gods and Zeke, and he's the one that brings

that message rather than just deciding, hey, it's our neighborhood, we better start doing something. So I love that strong sense of call that you guys have.

**Speaker 4** [00:06:53] So what year was that that you moved to Pittsburgh? How long have you been at the table

**Speaker 1** [00:06:57] with the Oasis project? That we have been in Pittsburgh eight years. It's like, wow. So literally we did start with the picking up trash and then we launched the Oasis project. So we started doing things right. Yeah, there was an after school program that we started. There was a transportation company. And I think the official launch of the Oasis project was probably about twenty thirteen when we just said, like, you know, let's kind of get an umbrella term for the things that we're doing. And so that's when we kind of formalized it. We're going to call this the Oasis project. But the ministry was just kind of unfolding for the last 18 years. But that's

**Speaker 4** [00:07:34] OK. Yeah, I love how it just started with something as simple as picking up trash. And I think so often we think we have to start out of the gate with this large program. And you're like, you know what? We picked up trash and it grew from there.

**Speaker 1** [00:07:45] Yeah, yeah. The most people ask about kind of like this strategic plan again, like God laid out this, you're going to do this. And he just did. It was one thing. It's kind of revealing a little bit. You take a step, God reveals the next piece. You take a step because I'm sure God showed you the whole thing that you'd run. You just want to know how to do this. And now let's do this. And it's really kind of unfolded that way.

**Speaker 2** [00:08:14] Let's talk about the neighborhood. We're Bible Church is located. What's that like or what was it like when you got here?

**Speaker 1** [00:08:19] When we can start with the schools and school is kind of near and dear to my heart, I, I came to this elementary school principals. The elementary schools in Homewood, which is the neighborhood, are two of the worst performing in the state. So that was. Pittsburgh, but the state of Pennsylvania, there's crime, unfortunately, that's a lot of what we have to work against. It's like almost every weekend there's like, oh, and a shooting, another one in home addiction problems, a lot of mental health issues. And so the community really is plagued with a lot of the societal ills are issues of food access and insecurity. We don't have a grocery store in the community,

**Speaker 4** [00:09:00] but do you see in the neighborhood that you feel pleases God? What are the bright spots in the midst of these broken places?

**Speaker 1** [00:09:08] Just the people that I always say there is hope in homeless. It's interesting. There used to be this mural that was kind of faded and someone painted over. But we got a picture before they painted over it and said, God lives in Hollywood. It's true that God is here. So even though they don't have a lot of businesses in Hollywood, it seems like sometimes people have forgotten. God hasn't forgotten the people in Hollywood. And it's actually a community, I think, rich in assets. There's a branch of the community college. There is a library branch here. There is an Afro-American music institute here. And so there are really good things. Unfortunately, I think the bad things just get all the press. But I'm always talking about the good things. And there are people who have chosen to live their entire lives in this community there, people who have come back. So they've grown up and they've come back to make a difference, which is really my husband, Storm, and he grew up in Homewood. The cafe that we have is literally a block

down where he grew up. And part of our back story, my mother actually grew up in Hollywood as well. Wow. Wow. Meet my husband. I didn't meet until freshman orientation in college, but then we found that, wow, our mothers went to the same high school and I spent my summers here in Homewood. And so there are good things there, just something that that needs to be addressed.

**Speaker 2** [00:10:31] It feels like God's been orchestrating the story for a long time. It does.

**Speaker 4** [00:10:39] So it is the church community like there with Bible Center Church. And how have you as a church lead into some of those good things that are happening in the community and uplifted those things?

**Speaker 1** [00:10:50] That our church has a pretty interesting congregation in that there are some people that live in the community and we have members who joined Bible Center when they were 12 and 13 and they're in their 60s and 70s now. We also have members who are really committed to a church that is about more than Sunday, which is really the focus of our work. I mean, you come to Sunday to be equipped, but then is how do you live out that ministry the other six days of the week? And so whether that is in a job that you might have living that out, and how do we as a church community make the larger community better? Because we're there. We are absolutely committed to being an asset really embedded in the community. And so it's about ministry seven days a week for the betterment of our community and that light that will draw people not to Bible Center, but to Christ. Right. That is what Christians who are living out their faith. This is what it looks like. The church is leading community revitalization. The church has the answer to all kinds of things that plague communities. And we want people to look to the church, to look to God for those answers. And so I'm hoping that that's what Bible Center is in our community. I also say and I just started saying this a couple of years ago when God was just kind of showing out all these amazing things that we're getting in ministry. We have about one hundred and twenty members. So we're not a megachurch for people that really are allowing themselves in a very authentic way to be used by God and God then just does amazing things with that.

**Speaker 2** [00:12:40] I love the slogan I think I saw on some of your pictures on t shirts the church has left the building. Is that kind of a main slogan for you guys?

**Speaker 1** [00:12:47] That was the shirt that when we started picking up trash with the shirt was Bible Center loves Holmwood on the front and on the back. It says the church has gone outreaching. It's basically the church has left the building. The church of the sign has gone outreaching. We're just not in the building church. We are in the community from picking up trash to being in the schools to just doing what we can. We're really out of the building.

**Speaker 2** [00:13:13] I love it.

**Speaker 4** [00:13:14] That's so amazing. So I'm curious, we've talked generally about the Oasis project, but I'd love to hear specifically what are the various initiatives within that umbrella that you carry out.

**Speaker 1** [00:13:26] So we focus on four areas, the first areas of education, then we do employment. Entrepreneurship and the environment and the environment for us is really the adaptive reuse of properties and our community, starting with education, we do after

school programs. So we're the two elementary schools that feed into the home with high school. So we do a five day a week after school program. We do a summer camp, we partner with the school. So we're not saying that we're we're doing what the schools aren't doing or anything like that. We're trying to provide enriching academic experiences that will help to really advance children's understanding of various concepts. Oasis Foods is kind of a second area and we have a coffee shop is the first piece of Oasis Foods and every Day Cafe, it's our coffee shop. And we started it, but for a few reasons. And one was that there just wasn't a third space in our community. Right? There was no place other than bars or barbershops for people to gather. Every cafe now has really been this hub for the community to get together so people meet and eat there. Even this past Saturday, we had an artist come and we did coffee and conversations. He presented his artwork and it was just great. The other thing that we do in Everyday Cafe is we're a space for employment for youth. We really felt that teens in the community should be able to get their first job in their neighborhood. And so we opened the cafe and then found that even as we were having youth apply, that there were a lot of things lacking. So first of all, we're like, well, you can apply online. Like, no, we don't have one at home, we don't have a computer. And then filling out the application and pencil and listening there, mom is the reference really helped us to launch a program called Literacy for Life, and that was teaching between 16 and twenty four year olds a lot of the skills that you need. We also have a farm and fishery we agree with. It's educational and the environment, and we are actually employing quite a few youth as interns for the farm and fishery. We grow all kinds of produce. We have an aquaponics system, we have hydroponics, we do traditional farming. And it's really teaching people in our community. We live in a space. There's no grocery store, but we can teach you how to be an urban gardener, that's all.

**Speaker 2** [00:15:53] I'm sorry. Can I ask real quick, is that farm and the fishery, is that within the neighborhood of homeowners that further out?

**Speaker 1** [00:16:00] Oh, yeah. Yeah, I know. It's it is probably, what, one hundred yards from me right now.

**Speaker 2** [00:16:04] It's awesome.

**Speaker 1** [00:16:06] So it's right in the community. And it's great because even for the kids in our educational programs, they come over and do lessons and things. We have a problem that we want better food, better me teaching kids about urban agriculture and nutrition and cooking. There are actually four other urban gardens in the community of Holmwood and we partner with the other four and we do a summer farm. Stencil every Saturday is like a mini farmer's market, but we all contribute produce to this to help get produce into our community. Let's see what other pieces of waste this community kitchen launched. I mean, you ask the question.

**Speaker 4** [00:16:42] I know I'm like this just goes

**Speaker 1** [00:16:44] on in this community kitchen launched in December. That's our most recent and that's a commercial kitchen. And so couple reasons for that. One is that to kind of expand the catering that we do through everyday cafe, but also and I'll talk about this next, we have a business academy to help support food based entrepreneurs. So a lot of people in our community have either side hustles or stuff they're doing under the table, which everybody does. But what we wanted to do is help entrepreneurs specifically with the kitchen, food based entrepreneurs to be able to scale their business. That is one of the reasons for Oasis Community Kitchen and that ties into our business academy. We have a

business academy that we own our own and it is focused on African-American, other underrepresented entrepreneurs. And we help them. We go through the curriculum that we're using as the starter curriculum. We take them through a 12 to 14 week course. We want to help you kind of understand, is this business viable? How do you do the marketing? How do you set up your business, the finances, all of that customer discovery? You might have a great idea, but nobody's buying it. Then you really don't have a business making sure that you're incorporating your labor costs and things like that. So we run two cohorts, run one that is just a food based cohort. And then the next one that we run is for just any business ideas. And then Oasis Transportation is a transportation company. And we started that with we got to twenty eight passenger vans and there were kids, kind of goes along with the low performing schools. Chronic absenteeism in our area was just kind of unbelievable. And there were a lot of children that just weren't getting the school and the school district. Does not provide transportation for high school students, and so we're doing some of that transportation costs really are prohibitive for a lot of programs. And so our company is we say it's a discount transportation company. We're not trying to make a million dollars on it. Our tagline is transporting the community to opportunity. But it also allows us to employ residents. And so were the prior residents who were able to drive or the company. Yeah, so I'll stop.

**Speaker 2** [00:19:01] That's awesome. So I want to make sure I get this all straight, you've got four different kind of areas you're working on, but then you've also got three rungs on a ladder. Can you explain those three rungs?

**Speaker 1** [00:19:20] And so the rung on the ladder, really when we think about education, employment and entrepreneurship. And so even though we can say that the schools are bad, but if somebody doesn't step in to intervene and so we do education at a lot of different levels. So from the elementary school through what we're doing at the business academy, education is absolutely a fundamental rung on that ladder to give yourself access to more opportunities. You've got to have a solid education. Employment is the second rung on that ladder for us. We believe that people want to be employed and meaningful positions. And so through all of the things that we're doing, we employ people in our education work at our cafe for the transportation company. We have a property maintenance and management company. We employ people there because really people want to work, you know, want to feel like they are earning a living. They are contributing to the economy in meaningful ways. They're going to work their kids, see them and bring a check home. I mean, that does so much in terms of your esteem. And so that really is the second round, right. Having a job. And then we also know the third one is entrepreneurship, because we know in America, for a lot of people, owning their own business is really going to be the thing that will help to bring them generational wealth. Right. And so to be able to do things for your family that will last for generations. And so for people who have business ideas, we want to help them to be able to do that.

**Speaker 4** [00:20:52] That's cool. It's so great. How did you discover all of these needs within the community that you talk about from going from picking up trash to having just this plethora of initiatives? Right. What's been the process as the Church and Oasis project has developed into pricing into these needs and understanding and how to meet these needs in such specific ways? Sure.

**Speaker 1** [00:21:16] And I think a lot of it is listening. So you're kind of looking like what's going on in the community, but you're also listening to what people are saying. And so an example is when the pandemic started in last March and schools were closed, we just called the parents of all the kids for an after school forum. So we had about a hundred and

fourteen at that time. And we just said, hey, how are you? And the first couple of weeks, everyone was fine. We were all thinking, this is just two weeks. It's like and no one knew that this was going to be like the next year. After about two weeks, parents started saying, you know what, I'm struggling with feeding my kids. And I had thought that if you have three kids and they eat two times at school and then your kids are home, well, you have to get food for them. But after our families are like, we need help with food. We talked to another nonprofit to see if some of those LDAP would help. We contacted the food bank and we started a a really a food distribution center. And I really think it comes from listening to people. People will tell you what they need. And if you're in relationship with them and they believe that you care, they'll let you know what it is. And so I think it's than just being in a position to respond to that.

**Speaker 4** [00:22:39] That's what I see is you've established that history and that relationship of trust to that people are willing to share with you what their needs are. So I think that's really important as well.

**Speaker 2** [00:22:47] I love that idea of listening because one of the aspects of that, Jeremiah twenty nine seven seek the welfare of the place to which you've been of the city to which you've been called. And that's going to be different depending on what city you've been called to. Right. So you're not going to you're not going to know you're coming from Michigan. What's needed in Pittsburgh. You've got to listen to the people. And they're like,

**Speaker 1** [00:23:07] look, if it'll look different. So I think a lot of the work that we do in education is because I was an educator. So you kind of do what you know, and God has shaped his people in very different ways. And I believe he'll plant you somewhere. And then it is it is listening. It is looking at the community assets and it's looking at the assets within your congregation to know what it is you're going to do. And then, of course, you're in conversation with God through prayer. You're not empty, right? It's like I have what God's given me. He's given me these talents. We have these resources. And then you to say, God, can you use this? And absolutely. I believe it will.

**Speaker 4** [00:23:44] That's awesome. The dangerous question to ask, if you

**Speaker 1** [00:23:47] will, that thing. Right? Sometimes we don't want to ask. We don't want to say, OK, God, this is what I have, because we feel like it's going to be something. But I mean, I could not be more fulfilled. Yeah. If you trust God, there's a need God in your hands and feet and voice and ears in this. Nudity use me and I just believe. Well, that's awesome.

**Speaker 2** [00:24:13] So so, Cynthia, one of the themes in our podcast is the built environment. We're interested in buildings and all that kind of stuff. I know you guys have done some interesting stuff. And you mentioned already some of your adaptive reuse ministries. Can you talk a little bit about what you've done with buildings, how you leverage that for your ministry,

**Speaker 1** [00:24:29] if you think about it, and the things that kind of go along with communities like ours, lots of vacant and abandoned buildings, what used to be a thriving business district in the late 60s and 70s, there were riots and buildings burned out and businesses moved out. And there really just wasn't even a thriving business district after that. One of the things that we said, instead of coming in and saying, well, let's try to build new, let's look at some of the things that we really feel like our assets in terms of the physical space in the community and see what we can do with them. And so really, all of

our projects have been adaptive reuse. And so where every day cafe is, that used to be the with post office. And then it was the church where our churches, we call our church the warm center. So it's the worship arts, recreation and ministry because we use it seven days a week. But that was a former Rite Aid. Rite Aid was there. This is a very busy corner in Hollywood. And the manager was making a bank deposit and he was kidnaped and murdered. The Rite Aid came in as a corporation and they shut the store down. And so that building sat vacant along with all of the memories that that had happened. Right. People knew that this is what had happened and then this is why this building was shuttered. And then to me, just having it sitting there is kind of like Satan got to win this life goal. But now you have this building that is a reminder of these things, and it's that vacant for years. Couple of years later, they sold the building to the church. But it really is reclaiming for God these properties. We have a beautiful property now on Homewood Avenue that we're leasing to the University of Pittsburgh. We purchased the building as a proactive move. It was two huge buildings on Holmwood Avenue. And we said this is such a big piece of property, the church just needs to buy it. And we bought it. We repainted it and we just held it. And then the University of Pittsburgh approached us about doing a community engagement center. And so we're leasing that building to them. They've done beautiful renovations. It's clearly the most beautiful building in Hollywood now that is owned by a church. And I think that is the church's role to take back the things that, again, Satan and fan and all these negative things have really stolen from God's people at community. And we're very aggressive about that. That's what really started even with you. Think back to the picking of the trash. No, this doesn't look like our slogan is we're going to make earth look more like heaven. Anything that doesn't look like heaven, we're about changing it. And so, again, being very aggressive, even with the physical space, it doesn't look like something that would make us smile. We're taking it back. We're going to make it better. And so I'm just pretty committed to that.

**Speaker 4** [00:27:27] That's incredible. You got so much going. I just love it. I want to get back to when you told the story about you acquiring the property, but now the University of Pittsburgh is working with you all to be part of you were like, oh, we just saw this property and we just knew we had to buy it. And so we just did. And I just think I work with churches, I'm thinking through property. And sometimes that process is just so long. And the the process of even getting to a consensus of moving forward and taking a risk and buying property like that. And it seems like you all just are ready to go. So I'm curious, but that looks like internally at your church, when those opportunities come up, how do you manage that? Even getting a whole congregation of people to and I don't know what your process there in terms of getting approval for these types of things, getting people to sign up to say, yes, let's do this.

**Speaker 1** [00:28:16] One of the things that my husband's grandfather did, he was very wise, even though I think he had an eighth grade education. He didn't go to high school. He worked in the steel mills here, but he was brilliant. Yeah. And one of the things that he did as the pastor for the first close to 50 years is he bought a lot of property. So not a lot of buildings, but he brought a lot of vacant property. So when we look at the community of potential like a property map, we own a significant amount of property in this community. And so I think that acquiring property and this adaptive reuse is really in the church's DNA. Yeah, sounds like a no, it's not something that feels foreign or like why would we do that? It's something that has been going on and. So I think people just understand that at this point, so that's not a big hurdle.

**Speaker 2** [00:29:22] What's your take on gentrification in Pittsburgh, in particular in the Homewood community?



**Speaker 1** [00:29:27] We have a phrase that we use because sometimes when there are positive things going on in communities, then people just say, oh, we're being gentrified. And so our phrase is within unification. We are changing within. We people live here. They work here. They worship here. Any changes that we're doing is coming from within the community. But I mean, gentrification is a is a real fear. There's a neighborhood that is just directly west of Hollywood. That target came in and then Google had an office. And then all of a sudden people who had been paying eight hundred dollars in rent for their apartment for years, all of a sudden the landlords like I can get three times that. And then so there are people that were displaced and so people are concerned about that. But there are also some very nice things that come when you can walk down the street and you can go to a grocery store or you can go to the post office or you can do business in your community. And so it's helping people balance that steer with we don't want the fear to make us immobile. Right. We're not going to say like, oh, we're just going to stay here and we don't want any improvements to our community because then that will attract outside investors. That really is helping people to understand how they can be engaged in that. And so if there are meetings and the city is talking about plans for your community, you need to be there and have a voice. Again, I don't believe it has to come with gentrification like your whole community has to flip and you're not able to live there. But again, there are things that just make neighborhoods more pleasant, places to live. And I think that people in Homewood deserve to have access to those things. And so it shouldn't be that you just live in a neighborhood and you don't have any services and resources. So I think you can have both. I think you can have good community and you can be able to stay there as well.

**Speaker 4** [00:31:26] How do you think that the church can strategically play a role in bringing that to life instead of gentrification?

**Speaker 1** [00:31:33] I think that it goes back to churches really leading change within their community. And so doing that community asset mapping and talking to neighbors, finding out what can the church do for you and then being committed to do those things. And I think when people see churches as positive change agents, that really I believe that is what will draw people to Christ. But I think that people will trust that while the church is for us, the church is for this community. And that's really what, in my opinion, church it should be about. Yeah.

**Speaker 2** [00:32:12] So do you think race has played a role in where it is now in terms of disinvestment?

**Speaker 1** [00:32:19] Yeah, that that that's a whole that's

**Speaker 2** [00:32:23] a big question.

**Speaker 1** [00:32:24] But yeah. I mean, so I don't know if you've looked at any of the data on Pittsburgh, but Pittsburgh has received all kinds of accolades for all the the most livable city. The most wonderful thing and we often talk about really is a tale of two cities. If you look at just the all of the disparities for African-Americans, I mean, this is not a great city for African-Americans. And Pittsburgh is still a very racially segregated city. And that was interesting. That was one of the first things that I noticed when I moved here. I mean, we moved from Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan campus, very diverse, all of that. And Pittsburgh was so black and white and almost defined by neighborhood boundaries. And so I'm maybe getting better, but Pittsburgh is really kind of stuck. So even Homewood was race riots that happened in the late 60s and 70s. And then there was this white flight

out of the community. There was displacement. There's another neighborhood called the Hill that the communities were displaced in that neighborhood. Poor blacks were sent to Homewood. And so you don't even have a lot of economic diversity in the community. And so when you pull together people who everyone's poor, everyone's black, all of this and it's kind of a deliberate like we're going to get you guys all in this community. Yeah. I mean, no, people don't want to invest businesses in that area. Lots of different services aren't applied to that area. And so, absolutely, race has played a part in how humble it is today.

**Speaker 2** [00:33:59] Yeah, yeah. And your hope is to reverse that trend.

**Speaker 1** [00:34:02] Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, one of the things that so there are some new housing developments in Homewood, but unfortunately, their rental properties only and low income housing. So I think. Well, that's great. New houses that are low income. But it's not home ownership, right, and so it's just rental, but if you don't allow for like, oh, here are some new houses and it's going to be a model of mixed income, that's what you need to really pull a community out of poverty. You know, everybody can't be poor. Right. Even the optics of it. Right. People see people getting up and going to work. And that's good for everybody. That is like, oh, this is the working community. This is what we do. And so I think sometimes we don't think about that when, again, you're in a community and everybody is receiving some sort of assistance or they're unemployed, they're just all kinds of things. That's not a recipe for a community to thrive. And so absolutely, that is kind of the message of the church that we want Homewood to again reflect the kingdom of God. And that would be everyone, regardless of your income, your living together. We're working together for about making this community better.

**Speaker 4** [00:35:16] So you just shared much of it, of what your hope is for the neighborhood. But I guess. How do you see this project bringing that hope right now?

**Speaker 1** [00:35:26] I think the piece related to on our own and helping people own businesses, if we can get the business community revitalized and with businesses that are owned by people who live in this community, I think that would be great, because I would just hate to see kind of that generation of business owners that are still operating, but they're just a few of them. And again, without a succession plan, without younger entrepreneurs or even a plan like, OK, is it time for you to sell this business? Can we work with you to do that so that the business continues beyond you? And so I think that would be one piece. The second piece is we want to start a preschool children in our community, they start kindergarten and they're already behind, like, how can you be behind the first day of kindergarten and no child to be behind just because it's day one. But we know that there are all of these disparities. And if kids don't start out feeling like I'm a learner, I can be successful. That's for me really is the next step that we want to address early childhood education before children get to school, that they will already be readers, they will already have a positive academic self-esteem, that they will be critical thinkers, and that they will also be compassionate people. And so I think if we can still those things very early, and it's not only for the children, I think when we think about adults, I think if we can work to change people's perception of people who live in Hollywood, right. That these kids are bright and they're beautiful and God has given them all of these gifts and they just need to be nurtured or just watered. Right. The seed is there. We just need a lot of it. But I think people's perceptions about what it means to be from a community like Hollywood will change. And that's really what I hope to do, that it'll be good for the kids. That'll be great for the adults, too.

**Speaker 2** [00:37:25] So, Cynthia, one of the themes we're exploring this season is helping pastors ask better questions. And my sense is you came into the Homewood neighborhood asking some really good questions is I think a lot of pastors are just thinking about how to get this church to grow. How do I increase the budget? Where did you get the instinct to ask, oh, what does this neighborhood need to come from?

**Speaker 1** [00:37:46] So when we moved to Pittsburgh, I took a job with the Pittsburgh Public Schools. I was a principal there. And then after six years, I moved to work in the church. And so it's funny when I got here. So first of all, I was told this day and I'm like, I'm working with people for years as the principal is easy. It's not easy here. And what happened was when people knew that I was here, even if it's just like they rang the doorbell at the church office and I opened the door and maybe I'm a good listener. So that's probably a good thing as opposed to asking questions. Maybe you should just listen. I'm a good listener, but people were bringing problems. I don't even know what to do. I think we always want to say to people like, you need Jesus for that or you need whatever. But if maybe people need food first, maybe they need a job first, and then you kind of work into the conversation about Jesus. And it's really that Maslow's hierarchy. Right. It's like, let's work on those basic needs and building relationships. And so it's learning to listen, really be interested in genuine relationships. I really want to hear your story. I want to know what it's like to be you and then how can I support you? And also, this perspective that's trying to write everything about you is a negative and everything about me is great. Right. I'm going to fix you up now. You're resilience, you're intelligent, you're resourceful, you have leadership. All of these things are looking at people for what God has invested in them and then helping them build on those things. I think that would be it. I mean, your ministry will grow. I think for us, we probably would have expected, like, wow, in eighteen years we would have grown to more than one hundred and twenty people. Our growth numerically, it's been kind of like small increments. What God has done on behalf of the ministry, I mean, there are mega churches that that God has not used in the way that he has used Bible Center. And I think it really is about people who are yielded to the Holy Spirit and God will just use them. And so we're not so focused on, well, how many people are church on Sunday. And we just know that God will provide. And so we just kind of leave it at that and not looking to the right or the left, not with the church down the street is doing that of the church over there on that. It's really what God has called you and your ministry to do. And being OK with that.

**Speaker 2** [00:40:12] That's awesome. Do you have any resources, books or inspirations helped you form your thinking about what the church should be doing in the neighborhood?

**Speaker 1** [00:40:22] I know that I have resources or books. I think it really is I know it's keeping your eyes open and your heart turn toward God. And just like God, this is where I am. And you show me what you want me to do. It is a posture of surrender, a posture of God use me. And again and it's not about me. It's about God. And I'm just a tool. I don't even see this is my church. Right. I'm just I'm holding the space. Your God said this is your assignment for now. And then at some point later, it'll be somebody else's assignment. But my job is to do my best while I'm in this assignment.

**Speaker 2** [00:41:01] That's awesome.

**Speaker 1** [00:41:02] I love it.

**Speaker 4** [00:41:04] You're very inspiring.

**Speaker 2** [00:41:05] You are very inspiring. Wish I wish we could clone you and drop you in all sorts of cities around this country. We'd see some some exciting things happen. So it's it's thrilling to know that's happening in Pittsburgh, though. So thank you so much for spending some time with us today. Our listeners are very enthusiastic about the things that you're enthusiastic about so far, and I'm sure you'll find many of them so awesome. Thanks, Cynthia. Thanks for following up with us.

**Speaker 1** [00:41:30] Now the.

**Speaker 2** [00:41:39] These codes right themselves, they say a prayer before I listen to the original recorded interview and invite the Holy Spirit to reveal to me what to share. And then listen very carefully to the interview, sometimes more than once. Then I start to write. You listen to this interview, so you know firsthand that the insights in this episode are profound and they come thick and fast. So what I'd like to suggest for this today is something completely new and different. I recommend you listen to this episode again, but this time at Google Maps, ready on a computer. And when Cynthia Wallace mentions the name of Oasis by Luke BAAM, look it up. Google Street Map. That's exactly what I did, but erected a double take about the farm. And asked if it was nearby or in the neighborhood. How is it possible to have a farm in the city? I wanted to see it for myself. I was amazed by what I saw. Then I started to explore the neighborhood and all the places that were mentioned. Of course, it's not the same as walking the neighborhood, but seeing Holmwood on Google Street View brought the stories of Oasis faithfulness, innovation and care for neighbors and revitalization of the neighborhood to a whole new level. Many insights came to mind, but I'll share only two. The first was an overwhelming sense of encouragement and Christian hope, not only for Holmwood as a community and a place, but for every neighborhood on God's earth. The secret was a reminder, Oasis is a small church that has one hundred and twenty members, isn't a lot of people. But it's a little larger than the average Protestant church in the United States. My guess is that most of the people listening to this podcast attend or past their congregation of one hundred and twenty people or less, Oasis reminded me of my own church and the very last sermon my retiring pastor Cindy Johnston gave a few weeks ago to our small rural church of 50 people, quote. We must guard against discounting the significance of what we have done together over the years. We must not assume that we are too small to make a difference, that what we do doesn't matter. Faith enables us to act in hope, despite how things look. And that's what will make change occur, is not our size that makes us effective, it's our faith. That's what makes what we offer is Christians different from what the world offers. A high commitment church may be small, but small does not mean insignificant, end of quote. Can wasis be a placemaking church, helping a community experience and embody more of God's shalom? It sure can. Can my small church or your church, no matter its size, do the same in your community and neighborhood? Absolutely, Oasis. So that's how. Thanks for listening.

**Speaker 3** [00:45:01] 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 embedded church dot 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 w w w dot embedded church dot 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 Bewell.