

**Rev. Matthew J. Watts**

Where: Grace Bible Church

\*\*\*

Date: November 22, 2019

Location: Charleston, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

Length: 1:08:14

Rev. Matthew J. Watts is the Senior Pastor of Grace Bible Church on Charleston's West Side. He was born outside of Mt. Hope, West Virginia in Fayette County and is an alumni of West Virginia Institute of Technology. In this interview he speaks about the West Side's history as the former site of five slave plantations, his congregation and church neighborhood, the West Side Community Development Plan and Charleston Urban Renewal's plans for the West Side, police brutality in Charleston, and the dismantling and destruction of the Triangle District in Charleston.

Rev. Watts was interviewed by producer Aaron Henkin with Emily Hilliard and Wendel Patrick as part of the *Out of the Blocks* podcast's two episodes on Charleston's West Side. Learn more: <https://wvfolklife.org/2020/01/17/out-of-the-blocks-podcast-highlights-charlestons-west-side-west-virginia-folklife-hosts-listening-party-february-12/>

AH: Aaron Henkin

EH: Emily Hilliard

WP: Wendel Patrick

MW: Rev. Matthew Watts

0:00

MW: My name is Matthew J. Watts. I'm the Senior Pastor of the Grace Bible Church of Charleston. And we're welcome to have you here at 600 Kanawha Boulevard West on the west side of Charleston. The Grace Bible Church overlooking the beautiful and the scenic Kanawha River, as I like to say.

Aaron Henkin: I learned that it's, I learned on my first day here how to pronounce Kanawha. Now, you know if someone says Kan-aw-ah, they don't know where they are.

MW: That's right.

AH: Right. Okay. (laughs) Um, tell me, just take me back. Tell me about your connection to this place-- this this town, this state, your roots here!

MW: Well, I'm a native West Virginian, born and raised in the southern Western coalfields in Fayette County. Little rural place called McDonald Hill, right next to the incorporated city of Mt. Hope, West Virginia. Educated in the public school system there. Had a great love for athletics, played sports, all of my life went to a small engineering school, West Virginia Institute of Technology on an academic and basketball scholarship. Completed an engineering degree there. Moved away to North Carolina, I mean to Tennessee, to work for Northeast Tennessee Valley Authority, but only stayed there a couple of years because the mountains were calling me back.

So I returned back to West Virginia in late 1978. So I don't consider myself from Charleston, always remind people I'm not from here. I will always be Mount Hope, West Virginia. But I've lived here for, for 40 years, actually. And so all of my public community service has been here, and for the last 35 years, have been associated with Grace Bible Church. So I'm licensed and ordained to the ministry by the Grace Bible Church. Pastored a couple of smaller churches for 10 years, and then became the senior pastor of Grace Bible Church 25 years ago. So, been here for 25 years and I fully cast my lot with the West side of Charleston community. Always had a great affection for the place. And I knew why--because my wife was from there and I met her in Charleston between my junior and senior years in college. But there was always something drawing me to the west side. I knew there was some here story that I didn't know about there was not being told. And so when I became the senior pastor of the Grace Bible Church in 1994, I just kind of felt that we should move to the west side. I didn't know why. Other than there's a lot of challenges over here. And I felt that the plan for the East End of Charleston was well-defined with the Charleston Area Alliance for Charleston Renaissance, that where we were on Washington Street East, a few blocks from the Capitol, even though it was a tough area at the time, the comprehensive plan called for the total redevelopment of the Washington Street corridor. And that Washington Street, coming off of the Interstate from the airport Greenbrier Street, down to Washington Street, the Capitol would be on the

left, then you turn, right. And so actually, the Washington Street was to be the gateway to downtown. And I knew that the plan for the--the fabulous Clay Center for Arts and Sciences and all of that. So I persuaded the church for us to move to the west side of Charleston--that the need there was great, because of the challenges and the fact that it has the highest concentration of African Americans live anywhere in the state of West Virginia, was another pull for me to come to the West Side.

So in 1996, this building became available, and we decided to purchase this building, move to the west side.

3:18

AH: You say you were curious and drawn to the story of the West Side. Talk about-- talk about how that story has presented itself to you over these decades that you've been here? I mean, what have you... What do people not understand about the west side? What is special about it? What's it... What's it up against?

MW: I think what it's up against is a history, a history that is couched in slavery, and discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, and exploitation, disinvestment, and outmigration. All of those words describe what's happened to the west side of Charleston. And so I lived here for 30 years. And I thought there was a secret about the place that no one was talking about. Because not being from here, I would listen to high-caliber business people that I used to interact with in my previous life as a corporate executive. And there was a disdain for the West Side of Charleston, I didn't fully understand. And I knew when they talked about the West Side, they was talking specifically about what's referred to as the West Side Flats. And that's the area that's parallel to the Kanawha river. And in particular, the area that had a high concentration of African American people. So it's obvious what they were talking about. And the stories that appear in the newspaper were often very...things negative and bad. It was the West Side, it was always referred to as that. And it was obvious to me and just about anyone else who had ears to hear that what was going on.

But I've been here 30 years and never heard anybody mention the fact that the West Side was established as five slave plantations. No one ever mentioned it! And people that were lifelong residents of the West Side was not aware of that history. And then some scholars West Virginia State University-- Dr. Billy Joe Payton, and from Marshall University, Dr. Eric Lassiter, they did this incredible expose on the West Side, they called Glenwood a window to the west side. And they unearthed the history of the West Side through census data, through some archaeological unearthings that I think Dr. Crowley (sp?), I believe, who's an archeologist. And they put this in an exhibit. And they started doing lectures about it. And I was amazed at how many native West Side people was not aware of that. So then things start to fall into place for me, right? Places like Hunt Avenue, where the Hunt were slave owners. Quarrier Street, a major street downtown, but also part of the west side, slave owners. Summers Street--slave owners, the Patrick Street bridge--slave owners, right? It become obvious that the place was marked with the names of people that had been the prominent landowners and the prominent slave owners. And that history basically was totally ignored. No one talked about it. The most profound conversation I had was with one of the most popular governors in the modern area [era]. Governor Gaston Caperton who had been a very, very successful business person, millionaire several times over and became one of the youngest governors back in the 90s. And through a mutual friend, we were having a conversation and I was telling him about this incredible revelation about the West Side. That the West Side story began with slavery. And gently he, he rebuked me and challenged me and said that cannot be. Because he said I was born and raised in

Edgewood, which was a fairly upscale neighborhood. It's called part of the West Side. But it's on the hillside. It was built as a segregated, middle, upper-middle class community years ago. He said it can't be. He said I played all over on the west side of Charleston. He said, we played that at Stonewall Jackson Middle School, which was the high school at the time--there's an athletic field there. He says, all we knew there was a haunted house that was across from the school. I said Governor, that's not a haunted house. That's actually a luxurious, magnificent mansion, right, that was-- the property was built by the Quarriers and the Summers, these families. And I said it's, you step into there you thank you stepping back in history. He just couldn't believe it. So I called Dr. Eric Lassiter to see if they could have someone meet us early one Saturday morning. So that Governor Caperton could get a tour. And so he did, he was just, he was dumbfounded. He could not believe that this mansion was there, that he did not know that it was a mansion and that no one ever talked about it. And so to me, that was like, it was incredibly revelatory. That something as powerful as that had maintained, had maintained a secret. And then other things started to unfold about West Virginia, about Charleston, about the west side in particular.

Several years ago when the martyrs were massacred in Charleston, South Carolina, and those of us who are amateur historians watching it very closely, because we know the history of Charleston, South Carolina, Mother Bethel Church, etc. And so a friend of mine at the time, had started to create some conversation as to why Stonewall Jackson Middle School, why the name should be changed. That you should not have right at the dividing line where are the most populated African American community in the state resides, a school named after a Confederate general who fought against West Virginia becoming a state and following the side of the Confederacy. Even though he was born, supposedly, in West Virginia. But I remind people, he was born in Virginia, in Clarksburg, Virginia, because West Virginia wasn't a state when he was born, right? And so West Virginia becomes a state during the Civil War, the only state to get that designation during that period of time. It was amazing, the backlash and the pushback that came from her raising the issue, that we should change the name of Stonewall Jackson Middle School. That in 2000plus, African American children should not be forced to go to a publicly-funded school that was named after a secessionist and a general that had fought against West Virginia becoming a state and the maintenance of slavery.

But here's the big issue. When the Governor Earl Ray Tomblin, responded to this whole conversation about not only Stonewall Jackson Middle School, the fact that there is a statute to Stonewall Jackson on the Capitol grounds, a few feet from the great emancipator statute, Abraham Lincoln. And the governor said there will be no discussion in West Virginia, about the renaming of monuments in places that's named to honor our Confederate people. We didn't understand where we were. I've always known where I was, right. But it was, it was helpful. It helped me to, to educate some of the other people, that Stonewall Jackson High School was a marker that was built in the 1940s, basically saying this was a slave plantation, white supremacy ruled this part... and they built the school right across from where the mansion is, okay? That was no coincidence that school was built there! And so it helped us to begin to educate the community how the legacy of slavery, racism, segregation, the oppression and the devalue of Black people that had permeated the land in the 1840s and 50s. It had not ended. That it still was a part of the fabric of the landscape.

And that's why over the years, we felt like we're getting so much pushback, we tried to raise some of these issues. So those were things that over time, I began to kind of understand it wasn't in my head, but there was actually a resistance to any type of movement to suggest that Blacks should be treated more equitably, and more fairly. And then when you start just looking at the demographics, and looked at how the systems, the city had invested things. So that was a major thing-- the slavery issue was the major

thing. And we brought the scholars to the west side, to actually do a lecture at Mary C. Snow West Side Elementary, which is right, a few blocks from here, on the Kanawha Boulevard and Florida Street.

11:41

And it was really fascinating to hear them tell how they found the information, what they established, and so forth. Then one other point, that became critical, right? This whole idea of this elementary school, and where this new elementary school is built, it's about nine or 10 years old. There hadn't been an elementary school built in an African American community around here for over ninety years. So we were fighting to get a school built there. So at the time, the plan was to build one large school, bring the students from the Edgewood community, that was predominantly Caucasian, all the students on the west side would go to that school, a larger school, then maintain another elementary school a little bit further west. And they would create what they call these primary intermediary primary for kindergarten through first and second, intermediate 3-5. We were all for it, we gone get a new school.

Well one of the school board members at the time, who is since deceased, was irate. He refused to support a plan that will build a single school that would create real integration, in 2000-plus, on the west side of Charleston. Stirred up the residents in the Edgewood community--they refused to support a school that would bring the Edgewood kids down to the West Side of Charleston. We couldn't believe it. We were appalled. We felt it...you know, we don't really care. If y'all want to be segregated, we don't mind segregated. We just want the first school to be built on the west side to be built at that site. Because the site was known as Cabell Field, a school had been built years ago during segregation--a segregated junior high school was built on that site, named after an African American family that had donated the land.

13:34

The Cabell Family, to create Cabell Junior High School during segregation. And so we felt it was fitting that a school be built there on that site. And I thought it should have continued to carry the Cabell name. Now here's another caveat how racism raised its ugly head. So when it came time to name the school, they decided it was not going to maintain the old name of Cabell. And I said, well, what did the Cabell family do to be dishonored after being honored? Right? (laughs) You know, they all dead and deceased, right? And they were tremendous educators and as well as philanthropists in their own right with their meager resources. But the decision was made...what I didn't really fully understand is that there was an unwritten rule that may have been written somewhere. The white children would not go to school in West Virginia with the name of a Black person's name on the building, right? I didn't know that until there was so much resistance to that school bearing the name of a Black person--decided to rename the school. The kids wanted to name the school Barack Obama Elementary, and then we knew that wasn't gonna fly, right? (laughs) That would never have flown. And so that was overridden. The kids final name was West Side Elementary, right? And we said well, you know, I mean the school deserves a name. So they put West Side Elementary in the name and we tried to get them to then name it after a patron Saint Mary Crozier Snow, who was the most fabulous educator I ever personally knew in Kanawha County. Born on Second Avenue. And Third Avenue, lived most of life on Second Avenue. Taught in the public schools for over 60 years, right, the first African American to be a principal of an integrated school in Kanawha County. And she taught until she was in her 90s as a substitute after she retired as a principal. And we thought it was fitting that her name be placed on the school. You would have thought that we were asking for her name to be placed on the West Virginia Capitol. The resistance that Board members, teachers, and so forth. So after a real battle over a period of months, right, we were able to finally prevail, and get her

name on the school, Mary C. Snow West Side Elementary, but those, those things, in itself just showed how much resistance there was to acknowledge the contribution of Black people.

And as I often say, you know, in 1865 with the passing of the 13th amendment that ended slavery, you know, Blacks had been enslaved for the most part, the majority of Blacks in America. And after that, from 1865 to the present, in the eyes of many Caucasians, we've just been a problem! But I beg to differ. We've been more than a problem! We have contributed to this republic, shared more blood on the foreign theater in wars per capita than any other group of people, have sacrificed in every single field of human endeavor. Even West Virginia, right? High participation in the military, coal mines, things like that. But we are not valued. We are devalued in this state, to this day by people in elected positions, people that run the economy and that type of thing. So the final thing, that I kind of--the point of this long narrative, right, is the other missing link, in terms of the way Black people are treated here. So you talk to me, you hear a tale of two cities. You talk to some people, it's a wonderful place, everybody gets along well, right? Great community. You talk to me and people that I've been working with for 40 years, and they will say it's a hard place. If you're Black. And it's doubly hard if you're poor. It's triply hard if you're Black, you think with your own mind, you have your own ideas, if you're willing to stand up and speak truth to power. But when we came to understanding what was happening on the west side. So not being from here and I'm always trying to pick up some leads of what's going on in this place, right? So some years ago, a young student, graduated from Stanford University, Anna Sale, worked for NPR in New York. She came to see me. I didn't know who she was. She said, I'm working on a project about the Triangle District. And I saw your name in the newspaper, a couple of articles. This is back in 2002, I think, 2000 or something like that. I said I'm not from here, but I know people who are from here, and I know people that lived through the Triangle, they know all about that they can tell you about it. So I gave the names of some people and she wrote a fabulous document, 103-34 page, you know, essay, quasi-book on the history of The Triangle. And that sort of piqued my curiosity and interest. I knew about the Triangle, I'd heard about it, didn't understand how significant it was. Really didn't understand how significant it was, and didn't know that I had been on the fringes, and didn't realize it. As an engineering intern in the summer of 1976, I rented a house from a lady on the East End. And I worked for Union Carbide in South Charleston. And she was a member of Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church, which at the time was, well, it's where it is now on Washington Street, right behind the Marriott. And I would listen to her husband and she having conversations at night and she was feisty, and she was very involved in the church. And she would say things like, they trying to sell us out again. And they mistreated us and so forth. I don't know what all she was talking about. And I remember something about \$85,000 in a new church and all this type of stuff, right? What I didn't realize that here in 76, I was here at the end of the demolition of the downtown Triangle District. So like in many cities, in the early 1900s, there were [unintelligible] carved out for Black folk, and Black people were allowed to live downtown. And they built what was called the city within the city. It was called the Triangle District because it was geometrically, you know, a triangular shape. And it was the pulse of the Black community, not just for Charleston but for all of Kanawha County. There was barber shops and hotels and juke joints and churches and clubs and business. It was an incredible place where the best and the worst happened, but it was the community that was controlled by Blacks.

So in the late 60s, they say West Virginia having applied and received funding to fund the interstate highway through West Virginia, interstate 77/79 and 64 connects in Charleston. And they decided to bring it through the Triangle. Even though the federal government at the time was saying, we found that to be a bad experiment. Don't dismantle communities, right, to bring in the interstate. But they decided to do it anyway. So it was the greatest, I believe, single activity that almost crushed the life of Black people. And it was the probably the greatest show of solidarity in terms of how Blacks organize, to try to save the Triangle and try to save housing. But the forces were united within a state federal government, they were

gonna fund much of the demolition. The water company was coming in and building a new water treatment plant. Charleston Renewal Authority had a plan for to create the superblock--the Marriott, the Town Center Mall, those parking garages, all of that was a part of the Triangle where Black people lived. And they decided there could be no residential housing in downtown Charleston. So everybody was removed. And what it did was it crushed the solidarity of the Black community because many of those people were renters. So they were sent to St. Albans there were sent to Dunbar, they were sent to Rand, they were sent anywhere they could find housing, that for rent, that the people would rent to them. There still was a lot of segregation of housing at the time. Churches were moved, literally, physically had to be relocated, because streets were totally taken away. And that's what the fight was about in summer of '76, is that after having moved Shiloh from Young Street, which is North, near where the interstate is, to Washington Street where, behind, where the Marriott is--it didn't exist at the time, right?

22:06

They wanted them to move again. And they refused to move and that created a lot of turmoil. Now, how does all that fit? Well, the way all of it fits is because you understand that the demolition the Triangle is what concentrated so many Blacks into the West Side in substandard housing, because the city didn't create any new housing, as they promised to do. And so they allowed landlords to subdivide, you know, large multifamily dwellings--single family into multifamily dwellings. They winked and looked the other way in terms of enforcing the building codes. And they actually allowed a slum to be created on the west side of Charleston. And allow the low income blacks--were moved into the west side, and a few low-income whites. And they were moved into public housing. And so that's how you get now in 2019. a school like Mary C. Snow West Side Elementary School. I suppose that, you know, all these years of *Brown v. Board of Education*, still have the population of probably 70% Black. Because we're still segregated because the historical housing patterns. And so the historical slavery, the demolition of the Triangle, it created this separation between Charleston and the West Side, and even within the west side of Charleston itself, the Black community being separated and segregated. So now here we are now 50 years past the Triangle and we're still fighting the two same entities--The Charleston Renewal Authority and the City of Charleston, who passed a plan back in 2008, The West Side Community Renewal Plan, to redevelop large swaths of the African American community, but would refuse to invest, invest that plan and invest, invest in that plan as they promised, after we participated, and so forth. And then it fooled us very, very strongly. So now we are at this point where they're now supposedly going to amend the plan that they didn't execute. And we still don't believe the plan that they have now is even in compliance with the law. So that's why I say there's this tale of these two cities, there's a lot of tension, right, and it still exists. We tried to be fair and reasonable and methodical, and measured in our responses, but some things happen. And then things really blow up. So now, I don't know if you're aware of it or not this major crisis with the police right now? Which is right now in this town, which, which is it's a major issue, like in a lot of urban communities. There has been tension between the police department and the, the residents. And as I've written and talked about this on many occasions, is that historically, you know, the police has been basically the face and the presence of local municipalities and communities, in poor communities, communities of color, they're often there to advance laws that are unfair, unjust, unreasonable, and so forth. And in other times, they're there to try to deal with the consequences from years of neglect. And the people are frustrated over the way they're treated, and what's happened. And it only takes one thing to serve as a spark to be a catalyst and then the frustration of the people boils over and it boils over, based on this incident, normally between law enforcement and the resident, but when really it is a frustration with the failure of government. But very often the people don't understand that the city council people, the people they should be fussing with and arguing with, that they've elected to represent them. And there's the planning department, right, and there's the building inspector, you know, and there is a Officer of



Community Development, and there's a mayor. But very often they see the police as being the government's presence, and the police are.

And so there was an incident that happened a few weeks ago, where there was an encounter between a police officer and a young lady that had been in a physical altercation, police trying to arrest her, the female police officer, she has her down face down on the ground, has been unable to both get both her hands in cuffs. Backup comes, police officer comes on the scene from the video that appears, he comes in you know, pretty aggressively knees the young woman in the head, and then punches her at least five times in the head. I mean, with the full thrust and force of his blows. This goes viral on social media, because someone is there, you know, recording with their phone. And, and people were really upset about how this matter was handled. And then in a couple of days, you know, the chief of police did an investigation, they come back and say you know, everything is fine. Policy was followed, you know, all is well, go back to business as usual. But the community said no. So there's a major uprising in the community, major public meeting that was held last week. And I think the mayor is probably going to respond, I believe tomorrow to the request that was made to her by the by the local Charleston Black Ministerial Alliance.

That's a long narrative, but hey, that's my story you told me to tell it!

27:31

AH: Well you said a lot there. And we'll kind of go back and unpack things part by part. And let me start with what you just said. I read an article by you, that you put together recently, setting Ferguson, Missouri, and West Side of Charleston, West Virginia, next to each other and taking a look and sort of doing a compare and contrast--talk about that.

MW: Yeah, there are a lot of similarities between Ferguson and Charleston. As I tried to highlight in the in the op-ed piece, in terms of high concentration of Blacks, even Ferguson's are much more almost two thirds of people in Ferguson, are Black and the fact that it appears that in Ferguson, the Black elite, the Black professionals, are really disconnected from the Black poor, because they really weren't on City Council. They weren't providing leadership. That's kind of what's happened on, on the West Side of Charleston. And I was encouraged, if you go and look at the Justice Department's investigation of Ferguson, which most people did not look at that once they exonerated the police officer, then they said okay, all is well. No. They cited the city of Ferguson, by using practice that was unfair and unjust, in creating almost a debtors-type prison to where Blacks are being targeted for traffic stops, being ticketed, being fined and then being brought into, you know, the judicial system as a result of that, and that they were fining them exorbitant amounts as a way of raising money to fund the government, the city of Ferguson, right? To generate revenue from the people. And that was one of the contributors to the frustration of the people. They feel like they've been treated unfairly. It only took them the Michael Brown situation for that to ignite. Similar in Baltimore, with Freddie, Freddie Gray, you find the same thing. The investigation against the City of Baltimore is pretty scathing. Right? But people are scared, they don't really look at that. I mean, they bought indictments against the mayor, against the council, and everybody and it turns out they neglected, you know, that part of the city and that type of thing.

That's what I believe is happening on the West Side. It's been 80 years of just neglect, right? Just an investment in that type of thing. And it's created this environment where people they, they're frustrated,

they don't know who to be angry at, or who's really responsible. They know that something is not right. Something's not fair. And so I think there are some real similarities between Ferguson and between the West Side, but there have been smaller places, right. And then when I was trying to warn, that just like in Ferguson, it took an episodic event, right, to ignite, you know, social unrest, that it could happen on the West Side of Charleston. And I think it nearly happened just a few weeks ago, because there was a response and had it happened maybe earlier during the day, and more people would have actually saw the police officer beating this ninety-eight pound woman who was face down on the ground with another officer sitting on her back, I think it could have actually escalated into a possible riot. Because the people's response to what they saw it on video was very strong.

30:53

AH: Let me change gears with you. And I mean, you've, you've painted a broad and thorough picture of sort of the historical circumstances of here and around this place. Let me let me ask you to tell a few specific stories from your own life, from your own experience. And I'm going to ask you to sort of rewind to when you were younger, I wonder if you can remember, like, like, do you remember what your first experience was with... sort of like racial injustice in your own life? And you're kind of like, your own sort of social and political awakening?

Rev. Matthew Watts: You know, I'm a late baby boomer, right? So I was coming of age on the civil rights movement. So I'm watching on television, people in Selma, and Montgomery, Alabama, and Mississippi and that type of thing. Water hoses being turned on people. So I can't say... there was never a time that I wouldn't have, wasn't aware of the racial tension and the animus that I sometimes felt that many whites had toward us, it's not been equal to them. Just the way I was, the situation I was born in, a little rural segregated community. I mean, so we went to segregated schools. Even after Brown versus Board of Education. I started school in 1962. That's eight years after Brown v Board, and other places had desegregated or integrated. But in Fayette County, many other southern counties in particular, they chose not to allow Black and white kids to go to school together. So I didn't go to school with Caucasian kids 'til 1966. So it was kind of obvious to us, right, that we're not wanted, and we really are not welcome. I never will forget the day that the Civil Rights Act was signed. I never will forget it. It was in like July of 1964. And I knew what that meant. I thought. (laughs) I thought I knew what it meant. I thought it meant that we no longer had to sit in the balcony when we went to the movie theater. That's the main thing that I knew there was clear and obvious, that we had to sit in the balcony. I never will forget going to the movie theater, my cousin and good friend of mine, we started up the steps. (laughs) That guy hollered at us, you boys, y'all better...what do you think y'all were doing? You know? We e started to go in on down the floor, "Y'all know where y'all supposed to be," right? And so I said wow, I mean I thought that things were going to change. So things didn't change! They didn't change for a while. When we moved into the project, it was a move up for us. We lived in very humble circumstances, as a kid growing up in our community. There wasn't a lot of public housing, there was like 20 public housing units. So if you got them--for Blacks--because the public housing was segregated. This is 1963. And, and I remember us moving in, and in the segregated little public housing complex. And I remember the Civil Rights Act and Voters Rights Act and all these acts, but nothing changed in our community. And when I left to go to college, in 1973, public housing was still segregated. And I know we were coming back home one weekend, and my younger brother, you know, he said to me, he said, you know, you know you'll never gonna believe what's happened (laughs). And I said, what? He said they let Negroes live in the white camp, is what he said. I mean it was kind of this profound thing that Black people can live, you know, in the same places. But it was interesting, because when you're in a small minority, you know your place and you stay in it. So we knew we couldn't be uptown after dark. So we didn't go uptown after dark. And if we did, we knew we'd have to run from uptown.

I passed newspapers ever since I was a kid, right? To help my mom and my family and so I would have my customers, to put the money, you know, underneath their doormat. So I didn't have to go back in the neighborhood in the evenings to collect, because if I went back by myself there was a chance I'd get rocked out, ran out, or what have you. There was no swimming pool or anything like that, there was this water hole, you know that we would go and swim at. And we, literally, we self-segregated because the whites wouldn't come when we were there, we knew it was gonna be trouble when they were there. But when we would come they would rock us, you know, and it was... What was really interesting about this is that...

AH: When you say they would rock us, that means they would throw rocks at you? MW: Throw rocks at us. Right. And we'd be scurrying around to try to get our clothes and try to get out of there because we couldn't see them. Like the little waterhole was down from the railroad tracks down in the low valley like, so they would be in high country, they'd be up on the hill. And there was trees and that type of thing. So what I'm saying, it was kind of, it was an interesting truce that you had. And I always was grateful that I didn't live in Alabama or Mississippi, because I could see it was a much worse for them in Alabama, Mississippi. But we understood our place. But what was ironic was that they would come and cheer for us on the basketball court. And on the football field, you see, and so, but there's still a clear line of demarcation that we were not equal. And we're not, we're not fully accepted. And so we accepted our place and things would be fine. And most of us figured out how to do that, we figured out how to accept our place. But I'll be honest with you, what we did try to do, and I would never have to have this conversation among friends, but if you would interview some of them coming out, they would tell you the same thing, that we would try to take it out on them in athletic contests, when the rules were established, right? (laughs) To demonstrate, you know, that there was a prowess that we had, you know, and that we weren't not afraid of them, we just feared the numbers. So, so you kinda come to grips with that as a kid growing up, you know what I mean? you kind of accept this is the way it is. And you found out how to, to accommodate to the situation and not be in fights every day. Aaron Henkin 37:10 It sounds like your path, you turned a certain corner on your path where you went from... Yeah, I mean, you mentioned that you had been very successful in sort of, in the private sector, in the corporate sector. And then you took this turn toward the ministry. Talk, talk about that story, and how that... there must have been a moment of awakening or a moment of conviction at some point along the way. Rev. Matthew Watts 37:35 You know, a lot of people my age, you know, were trained and raised to be God fearing. There's never been a day in my life, I didn't believe in God, right? I mean, mother believes in God, my grandmother, believed in God, you know, so we revered God, with a high regard that there is a God one day we got to be accounted, and that type of thing. My family weren't church-going people. But my older sister, she would take me to Sunday school, expose me to the church. So I always had a healthy view of the church. I thought the church was for the people. And there was always good ministers in my town that tried to encourage me as a young boy growing up. So I always had great respect for the ministers. And then looking at someone like Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy and John Lewis from a distance, it even elevated the statue of the ministry in my eyes, right? And hearing about people like Adam Clayton Powell, and knowing that they were ministers as well as, you know, in his case, a congressperson, that type of thing. So, school teachers and ministers were always elevated in our community, right?

I always tell people, one of the great blessings I had was segregation. Because brilliant women who were not allowed-- Black women were not allowed in any of the professions--they would go on to be educators. I'm convinced that I was educated by some of the smartest people in all of Fayette County, right. And I was amazed by the time I got to junior high, right? What I knew, and the kids didn't know, we went to the Caucasian school, because we were drilled, you know, and I was never in a grade in elementary school-- we had one grade in it. I remember Miss Watkins, this woman was a genius! Fourth, fifth and sixth grade. We're all in the same room together. And she was like, you know, maestro, but I saw what she did.

Everyone worked at their pace. So if you're in the fourth grade and you can do sixth grade work, you did that with sixth, seventh, and eight. So she knew how to educate us. And so we felt really blessed to have them as educators. So educators and ministers always had a high regard and held in high esteem.

So for me, personally, you know, just going through life trying to figure out what I was going to be when I grew up, I never really knew what I wanted to do. Like most, a lot of young boys want to be a pro athlete, right? You think you can get the pros and be rich and take care of your family. But when I realized that wasn't going to happen, you know, I was kind of, I think this disillusioned when I left college because my whole life had been defined by athletics. From the time I was, you know, maybe six or seven years old. And I was searching for what is life really all about? So yeah, there was an episodic event that my mother got deathly ill. I was in Knoxville, Tennessee. They contacted me and told me they didn't think she was gonna live, right. And a lot of people have stories like that. This is my story, you know, and I drove back from Knoxville, Tennessee, at breakneck speed to try to get to that [unintelligible] Hospital in Beckley before she died. And like you do in time of crisis, you pray, you're praying, you're crying, you're hollering out to God, saying Lord, I'm not ready for my mother to go, so forth and so on. So when I got there miraculously, my mother had not died. And the next day, she was in a coma for several days, she comes out of this coma. And the doctor comes in, and I can see look on his face, he cannot believe it. How does someone who had almost no liver function, you know, not die? And she didn't. And that stuck in my mind that I really...well maybe God had did that for me. And I thought about that afterwards, I thought that was God speaking to me, you know, it's time for you to decide that you're gonna live for me. And that's just what I decided to do. I decided, I would turn my life over to Jesus Christ to see if I could figure out what God wanted me to do. And how could I maybe do something that would make some kind of difference in this world. So that was [unintelligible] on March the fifth, 1978, God then miraculously opened the door for me to get a job back in West Virginia without me even contacting them. They contacted me, Union Carbide, said you worked for us in the summer, did a great job, we offered you a job, you decided to leave, would you come back and work for us? And I came back. And by that time, this was late 78, So now I really knew in my heart that I would be doing something that would be in service to God, something both connected to the church. And I thought getting involved in church and doing things, and the rest is kind of history. You know, my pastor encouraged me, doors for me to speak, you know, opened up. And I discovered the speaking gift I didn't really know I had in terms of public speaking. And then once I started to speak and get opportunity, it was like this is what I should be doing.

42:23

AH: Help me feel like what it's like to see through your eyes on a Sunday morning when you step up to the pulpit and look out over your congregation. Talk to me about who you see and what's in your heart and what your mission is at that point?

MW: I think it's more of what I see Monday through Saturday. And I walk a lot. That's why I got this walking suit on. I had this heart attack last year and now I'm serious about my health and so forth. I see the pain of poor people. I see the pain of Black people in particular. My wife and I moved in on the street, at the time it was the toughest street on the West Side of Charleston, about 6 years ago. And I feel led to do that because I feel like I've got to feel the pain of the people--their pain gotta become my pain, their problem gotta become my problem, because if it is, I'll be more creative, more disciplined, more determined and more resolved. More courageous to try to do something about it. So I kinda feel the pain of the people during the week. Out on the streets. I got an article--I'll send it to you, I haven't published it

yet. The pain of the poor people, the pain of Black people. And I wrote the article just from what I saw one day, right? The people with substance abuse problems on Central Avenue who stand on the corner for the little joint to open up so they can go in and start buying beer, going to Florida Street Exxon, near where I live, the procession of people buying cigarettes, of people buying 40 ounces of beer, right? The women at the Recovery Point women's substance abuse facility, they have to do a trudge through the neighborhood every day. And they come from all over the state. Most of 'em come out of prison. And they trying to kick, for many of 'em, their opioid addiction, and so they have to walk from a block from my house right across from my house where they reside on Stockton Street, and they have to walk to the Exxon as a part of their daily ritual, right? But the Exxon won't let them come in the store but 4 at a time because they're guilty of shoplifting before they shoplift, right? Just assumption they're gonna come in and steal something. So they're gathered around outside of Exxon, I don't care how cold it is or whatever. And they're smoking cigarettes 'cause they trying to beat the other addiction and by, it's just the pain you see of the people. So by the time I get to the pulpit on Sunday morning, you know, I know that some of my people experience that pain as well. And so I look out on my congregation and I see them out there and I know the people's whose mother is suffering from Alzheimer's, right? Whose son is in prison, right? I know the grandmother that lives across the street whose raising her granddaughters because her daughter has her problem. And it's really trying to feel people's pain and their experience and then asking the Lord, is there a word? What word can you give to me that will speak and to bring relief, and if not relief, some hope. And what I see in my congregation, I see incredible resiliency. We have a small congregation, but we are incredibly important to this neighborhood. Normally when somebody gets shot, they call us. They want the funeral here at this church. Cause they know that we believe that everybody needs compassion during their hour of bereavement. I don't care how the person lived out there in the neighborhood in the street, right? We open the doors of this church and try to bring the people some comfort and some relief. So that's what I see. So by Sunday morning, I just want to have credibility. I want to have credibility to be able to say that I can speak to problems and pains in people's lives. Cause I got my own, I've got adult children, 11 grandchildren, right? Sister that's ill. We got our own challenges. But we try and respond during the week. We try and respond during the week to the things we encounter. Housing, we got a housing program, you know, people only half pay us, we trying to respond to the pain in the community so that people believe that we really care. But ultimately so that we can see that we believe that God cares and God is caring through us. So give God a chance.

46:52

AH: You just painted a lot of portraits of reasons to despair. I wonder if you might a few portraits with words about little moments along the way that give you hope and that inspire you about this neighborhood and the people in this neighborhood, you know? Sometimes I imagine doing the work that you do, it's easy to feel inundated by all of the challenges, but I imagine it probably gives you fuel from time to time, there are things that you might see or hear or encounter that inspire you as well.

MW: Absolutely, I mean you spoke to one of my heroes, one of the most incredible people I've ever known in my life, and his wife, it's elder Tom Toliver and Mother Phyllis Toliver. Tom's 87 years old and Mother Toliver's 85. They're still caring for children in this neighborhood, they helped raise other people's children. There was a mother in this community who was in prison for 7 years and they took their kids back and forth to school and made sure those kids were fed and made sure those kids went to ballgames and participated in things like that. It's someone like that who's driven by their faith. They get no remuneration for it, no real recognition for it, they're driven by their faith that they believe that God cares about people. God is caring through them, so it gives me tremendous encouragement, someone like that.

48:26

I got a member of my church who's recovering from a brain tumor. Whose sister is paralyzed because she had a similar thing and she opted to have surgery and it left her paralyzed, who recently found another sister dead. He's here every Sunday. He's here every Wednesday. He's one of the elders and the deacons of our church. And the resiliency that he has to still be ministering to the people in the church, in the community where he himself is still going back and forth to Pittsburgh for treatments, right? Trying to comfort his own family. With kids in our church that have been dealt a tough hand. You know some of them, father's in prison, some of their fathers happen to be dead, some of the kids don't know who their fathers are. But they're going to school any day and they're trying, right? And they're solid citizens in school. And they have every reason to say I'm mad at the world, right? And be wreaking havoc within the school system, and we just got the report cards and we were just so excited because they all did well. And so we took a delegation of them to Morgantown this past Saturday to the West Virginia football game and then we took 'em to the movie to see Harriet Tubman movie as a way of trying to inspire them by someone who had gone through difficulty but had tremendous faith in God. So it's still the people. And even the people in the neighborhood that I described, right, the fact that people suffer but for the most part, you know, they're not trying to hurt other people. They're still, they're suffering, they're dealing with their suffering and their pain, but they're not trying to hurt other people. So the pain of the people is something that motivates me to want to try and do something to try to mitigate some of that pain. But their perseverance, right, their resolve also motivates me in terms of the human spirit, and what people got inside of them, right? So you keep trying to do the best you can every day.

50:48

AH: You've been listening along, I wonder if, wonder what you might want to ask, what you feel like what else we might want to cover.

EH: Yeah, so you spoke a lot about the history of this neighborhood as being the number 1 uphill battle. Could you talk about what you're doing to deal with that history, confront that history and then propel change into the future?

MW: That's a real question--what do you, what can you do to try to counter, to offset you know, 150, 155 years of history that's laid down like shellac in layers, right? You try to educate. You still believe in the power of information. The power of knowledge. I cannot do better if I don't know to do better, right, and if I don't know the history then I can't appreciate the impact it might be having today. So not just to dwell there, but say, we can get a common understanding of these things did happen, right, they're not just a figment of my imagination--they really did happen. And that history does play into the structure that currently exists today. Then you try to build that to move forward. So specifically what we're trying to do now, we're saying to the Charleston Renewal Authority and the West Side, the City of Charleston, that the West Side Community Renewal Plan is vitally important to this community because it's supposed to be the plan that maps the pathway forward to revitalize and redevelop the community. So that's why we've tried to engage and to realize, we need a very robust plan, not just nice graphics and words on a piece of people but a plan that we all really can buy into that we think could be the pathway forward to serve as the guiding light to do so. So that's important. The other thing we're trying to do is to get...sometimes people, they accommodate to the way things are.

52:59

So to the rest of us here, we're saying you guys have got to want here. You got to believe that things can be better. You got to be solid citizens, you got to participate in terms of registering to vote and voting. Talking to your politicians about the type of, the dreams, aspirations you have and the things that they could do, right? And that hasn't happened in the past, right? We only expecting things from the politicians and for the most part, they haven't done anything to help us really. So that's the awakening that has to occur. But then we got to speak to the broader society to say, understand it's not a zero sum game. That I call the West Side of Charleston an economic transfer center. And I looked at the economics, okay? We have like 360 million dollars of income that's in this community and so where does that money go? It circulates in and out and very little of it remains in this community. So then we're saying to the business community, you guys have a vested interest in our kids learning, in our kids' development, our kids getting better. If our people are more productive, right, they can produce more, they can earn more, they can spend more. So part of it is getting the larger part of Charleston to recognize how critically important the West Side is to the future of Charleston. Because Charleston is declining in population. It's dipped below 50,000. It was 85,000 people in 1960 right? So the people who cannot go anywhere, who doesn't have anywhere to go is the low-income Black and white people, like the West Side and parts of the East End. So it's become a larger percentage of the overall population. So us working together to develop the people and develop the place where they live is critically important because they're going to drive the economy moving forward. And they're driving the economy more now than they get credit for.

55:00

A gentleman said something in the paper the other day--he don't know how much it hurts him to say that but I appreciate his honesty and what his views were. When the community came together with the mayor and city officials to talk about this incident where we believed it was excessive force applied by the mayor of Charleston police office against a young female, one gentleman wrote in the newspaper that the people that contribute the least are demanding the most. Well, we just demand that we don't want police brutality to be a part of our neighborhood. We're not against the police. We respect them and we're all for them and we support them, you know. But the idea that we are contributing the least--well, you don't understand that the people from this neighborhood, they work in the restaurants, they work in the hotel, they work in the hospitals. They help to drive, right, the economy downtown and then they spend their money downtown. They are contributing a lot! And without the contribution that they're making, Charleston would be in serious trouble. So when you devalue the people and the place where they live. So that's been part of the larger uphill battle, when a place and the people there have been devalued for so long and they've been viewed with such disdain that it's harder to get the broader population to realize that we really are in this together. The old cliché, we came on different boats, came on different ships but we're in the same boat now? I mean it really applies.

56:31

I'll give you a specific example. In September of 2018, Newsweek ran an article about a report that had been compiled by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. There were 2 reports actually, one was the County Health Survey Report, where they rank their 3,152, 55, 52-54 counties in the nation in terms of their health, where they are. And then one was a Life Expectancy Report. And they rank all, every zip code in the United States is ranked. They did this incredible study, collected all these death records and analyzed 'em and put them in some type of matrix and spit them out. So here's the bottom line. The bottom line is that West Virginia has 5 cities out of the 50 cities they rank with the lowest life expectancy. 5 cities in West Virginia in the top 50 cities with the lowest life expectancy in the United States. And the West Side of Charleston and West Huntington are tied for 27th. The lowest life expectancy in the United States. So you can go to this report and put your zip code in and it will tell you what the life expectancy is for the people who live in that zip code. And you can see, you can go fairly close and life expectancy goes

from 62.6 I think on the West Side, to Edgewood and is 80 years old. Close to 80 years of age. Right? So just bringing those things to bear. I mean this is a reality, right, that we gotta come to grips with. So to answer your question specifically, you know, trying to rally support for this West Side Community Renewal Plan. Trying to help local business community and city officials to realize that the West Side is critically important to the future of Charleston, right? We have much of the flat land. We have much of the flat land and some hilly land that could be residential. Charleston has to create more housing so that young professionals like you could live in Charleston and not pay exorbitant rent for housing on the side of the hills in Edgewood or in South Hills. So that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to rewrite this narrative that we're not just a problem, nor are we just over here with complaints, right. We also trying to bring solutions in terms of how we can work together. And we don't want to be adversarial. It's only adversarial because we can't find the people reasonable to sit down with us and understand, here's what we have looked at. We've documented, we've researched this, right? And here's ideas in terms of how we can move things forward. And here's specifically what we're able to do.

59:18

So one of the problems I have...It's not a problem, one of the concerns I have, is that without intending to do so, I think I've maybe become the poster child to why people should leave. Because I don't think I've done anything to hurt anybody, right, I've written 60 op-ed pieces. I've never criticized a politician. I've talked about a policy, I talk about...but not individuals. I don't attack people, right? And I've been vilified. So much so that you know, even people trying to help start believing things that's said. I mean you can even talk to other people, they would kind of tell you the same thing. So and it's a hard sell to make to a lot of young African Americans to why they should stay here. Because they look at my 40 years of service and look, you're fighting over stuff that supposedly part of the United States Constitution! I mean you're fighting equal protection under the law! Right? You fighting that the city filed the law that exists on the book. And they figure out a way not to do it, and then say you're the problem for raising the issue. What I've tried to do is to stay engaged, not become angry, not become bitter and to try to be a voice of reason. I'm always trying to say, here's facts, here's data, here's information. Hoping that at some point some people will come along and say, you know what? That's doable. I don't think I'm gonna see it with my eyes. I don't think so. I have become to the point to where I'm hopeful, but I'm not overly optimistic. But I do think some good seeds have been sown and maybe you know, at some point in time there will be some fruit that will come up from it. 'Cause I'm tired. You know, I'll be honest. It's been a hard press over too long of a period of time. But you still hopeful! And the kids deserve it, I mean that's what I really see. I see here a generation of kids. I'll close with this.

1:01:44

I've lost count of the number of funerals I've attended for young people. And I'm glad that it seems to be fewer than there was in the past. But what concerns me is that a lot of younger people are becoming very cynical, you know, about things. About the political process, about how you get things done, and that's of a concern to me as an African American person because you know, we've always kinda had this optimism, you know, we gonna keep fighting, God gonna show up and help us, good people gonna see, and the reinforcements are gonna come. And I'm concerned that some of the younger people are disengaging. But there are some that are not, so you're always hopeful that the small remnant will continue to move something forward.

1:02:58

AH: We kept you for a while and you've been fascinating...oh yeah.

WP: Yeah, I just have a question so, it's been really fascinating just listening to you speak about all of these things and the demographics and I'm just wondering, in the past when you speak to your



congregation, we're outsiders so we don't know a lot of this history, and I'm just wondering how you approach moving things forward with people that have lived here and that are from here. When you speak about these issues, do you speak about them in...do you find yourself speaking about them in a different way because these are people that have existed in this community and are familiar with all of the issues that you've spoken to as opposed to people like ourselves that aren't from here?

MW: Excellent question in terms of how you articulate these issues with people that are from here. What's kind of amazing is that we suffer from historical amnesia. I'm amazed at the people that live here, they don't know this. It's really amazing to me and what's really interesting you to ask that question is that the people that were teenagers during the Triangle District, they never talked about it. Okay? and that's what was amazing to me and I remember when I started bringing up about the Triangle District and how critical it was and how it crushed the spirit of the Black community and so forth and I talked with some friends of mine that I've known for 30-40 years. They had never mentioned they lived in the Triangle. And I talked to more people and I began to realize that that experience I think was so traumatic for them and they were so embarrassed by the fact that they couldn't stop it from happening, they just stopped talking about it. So then the younger generation people are not even aware that Black people lived downtown where the Town Center Mall is, where the Marriott--they're not even aware of any of that history. So we've actually started a little project and one of your colleagues actually came to one of the sessions. We call them Remembering the Downtown Triangle Champions. And I found some of these individuals, and some of them, I didn't know that I knew them! Right, friends of mine, right! And we had one session here where we got them to talk about their experience. We got it videotaped and audio taped so that people can hear these stories of what things used to be like and how things were. And it was just kind of amazing to me that I had members of my church that had never mentioned the fact that they had been part of the Triangle experience. It's almost like people had totally shut it down and they stopped talking about it. So now there does seem to be a renewed interest. And we're hopeful that maybe there's renewed interest in the rich Triangle District in terms of just how vibrant it was and the number of Black businesses that were downtown, you know, and the impact that they had. And a whole street that was controlled by Blacks. It was called the Block, right? And most people that, they under 70 years old, they don't know nothing about that 'cause we didn't tell the story. So that's one of the things we're doing. And we, I was, I've been initially encouraged by the response to the people who came. We've had a couple more of those Remember the Triangle evenings and getting 'em posted online. But one of the guys, I'll close with this. Emerson Reed who is an incredible individual and he was just a 20-21 year old during the Triangle situation. And he took the, like one of the lead people. Do you have the video [Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uZfSQTY5gI>], Emily?

EH: The New York Times, or the state archives?

MW: Yes.

EH: I think I sent it to them, yeah.

MW: Ok, there's a young man in the video, right, named Emerson Reed. And I didn't, just got to know him in the last year or so. And I was interviewing him as a part of collecting this footage. And I asked myself, what do you think the impact that the dismantling and the demolition of the Triangle had on Black people and what he said was exactly what I thought as someone who wasn't here. He said it was a battle that was lost, right, but it was devastating. It just crushed the spirit of the people. And they put up such a valiant battle, going to the circuit court, appealing to the United States Supreme Court, doing all these things they were supposed to do but every time they'd be knocked down and then when it actually became a reality, they tore down their entire neighborhood and nothing was left. And he said he felt like it crushed the spirit of the people that they didn't think they could get anything done. And I think that's a part, the group of people that fought that battle and lost, I think their spirits were crushed and that the next

generation, they didn't inspire them to want to do things, you know what I mean? The next generation has kind of just been wandering around angry but not knowing really what to do.

1:08:14

END OF TAPE  
END OF INTERVIEW