

Sam Brannon

September 18, 2020 50:25

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Lutheran, community organizing, Christian, faith, social justice, COVID-19, alcoholism, St. Peter Lutheran Church, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, diversity and inclusivity

SPEAKERS

Sam Brannon, Mary Wilson

-
- M** Mary Wilson 00:02
All right. My name is Mary Wilson, I am interviewing Sam Brannon This is September 18th and we are here to talk about life in the pandemic and life as a minister - and get Sam's perspective on both of those [phone rings] - I had a call coming in, let me turn that off.
- M** Mary Wilson 00:29
All right. Well, Sam, let me start off with some pretty broad questions, which is, first of all, just tell us a little bit about yourself, how you have come to be who you are, what some of your formative experiences have been, and we'll just go from there.
- S** Sam Brannon 00:48
Okay, well let's see - I'll start off with, I'm the pastor. My name is Sam Brannon, and I am currently the solo pastor of St. Peter Lutheran Church in Elgin, Texas - up in Chicago, they might say "El-gin," but down here, it's El-i-gin, (Robert Morris Elgin), named after the guy who brought the railroads in for the cotton crops back in the 1800s.
- S** Sam Brannon 01:16
The community that I serve was founded largely by Germans, which were separated from the Swedes, who were just just over the hill away. They founded the congregation in 1918

and we just celebrated 100 years. We had a big day and a big shebang - a lot of big party there and then did all the things that you might thin a German Lutheran congregation might do.

S

Sam Brannon 01:50

It's a heck of a lot more than a German Lutheran congregation [now]. Everybody's been sort of mixing and mingling in the last hundred years. We are a family oriented, family sized congregation and we worship currently around maybe 55 to 60 on a Sunday. Previous to that, we were at about 85 to 95 on a Sunday. We almost rarely broke 100 except for Christmas and Easter, of course.

S

Sam Brannon 02:31

When I came to this congregation three years ago, they had gone through 10 years of what I call the "valley of the shadow of death" - through an interim, that was really good, first call pastor that was not a good fit, and then an interim that was really good. Then they were quite ready to accept another pastor. They were very ready to bring in a new pastor, and they got me.

S

Sam Brannon 03:07

To start this whole thing, I think it needs to be said that this is the first congregation I've served, where not only do people believe that I should be there, but I feel inside an inward tug to be their pastor. I mean, this is very Holy Spirit stuff that's going on here.

S

Sam Brannon 03:34

What brought me to this congregation - I was having a few years back, some real trouble in my career as a minister. I was at a spot where I had been in three congregations and none of them ended well. Not all of it was my fault, but I was there nonetheless, and so, I was a part of it. After the third congregation, we moved back to Georgetown, my wife, the two kids and myself.

S

Sam Brannon 04:09

I said, "God, I'm taking a break. I'm getting out of this for a while, I'm [not going to] pursue another congregation, I'm [not going to] actively look around." I started doing some part time work here and there. Just trying to cobble together a living for the wife and kids. Then I answered an email that came to me in the middle of nowhere [saying] that Texas

Impact was looking for some position - I remember[ed] those guys - the congregation I serve used to give them a little bit of money every year. I went and I interviewed. The next day after my interview, I got a call from Bee Morehead and she had wanted to hire me right away.

M

Mary Wilson 04:59

What was the position there?

S

Sam Brannon 05:02

The original position was [for] member director and I thought, "Well, that's perfect for me, I can do that. I'm a salesman, I'm not a great closer, but I'm a good salesman. I can go out and I can draw membership, I'm really good at that." It turns out, it wouldn't have been the right role for me.

S

Sam Brannon 05:22

She needed somebody to work on a water project and I had some experience with Texas Water [Texas Water Development Board] growing up here in Central Texas. I grew up swimming in Brushy Creek, and my parents, my mother married this man, and he was a German Lutheran guy. I was always connected to the land in some way, in the state. I was a little more aware than most people about state politics, and state government. So, when she started talking about the water project, I mentioned that I remembered 2013 and how we voted to take \$2 billion from the rainy day fund and put it into the Texas Water Development Board for projects dealing with water retention, drought, mitigation - and that really lit her on fire.

S

Sam Brannon 06:27

Then in person, she offered me the position. It was about a little more than two years of real fun. I just had a great time doing it. Eventually, the funding ran low on the position and I had to go find something else to do. This is one of those Holy Spirit things - I was coming home to tell my wife that I was going to have to find other work. That night, before I even said anything, the phone rang and it was a representative from this congregation [that] said, "Our pastor left because she had to retire. We need somebody on Sunday, will you be here?" So, I showed up.

M Mary Wilson 07:11
You've been there ever since?

S Sam Brannon 07:12
I've been there ever since. I made it very clear that I wasn't going to interfere in any way in their process of finding a new pastor. If they needed to find another pastor and it wasn't me, that's gonna be fine. I really was hands off with that, but they really wanted me to be there. I wanted to be there too.

M Mary Wilson 07:37
It's great when you find a match like that. I've had similar experience in that way. Let me back up a little bit, if you don't mind. How did you get into ministry in the first place? What were things from your childhood growing up, so forth, that led you down that path, that helped shape you?

S Sam Brannon 08:00
As I said, my parents were divorced when I was very young. This is a part of the story - it was a very bad divorce. You remember that movie Kramer vs. Kramer, from the 70s? It was that kind of divorce. It was really nasty and my parents were both very immature children at the time, barely out of their 20s. They really put me through the wringer as a child - a lot of baggage from that that I've had to deal with over the years.

S Sam Brannon 08:35
When my mother remarried, she started her own family, I got to stay with her. My dad remarried, he started with his family. That sets up this weird situation where both families went to church. My mother's family was moderately religious, what I mean by that is [that] they went to church, sometimes. Then my father's family was way on the other extreme. They went to church every Sunday. When I went to visit, my stepmother made me memorize the Nicene Creed by writing it out.

M Mary Wilson 09:23
Were they both Lutheran?

- S** Sam Brannon 09:25
No, they weren't. My mother took me to the Methodist church because it was the closest one, it was nearby. Bob Long was the pastor there and he was a very charismatic man. He really did a lot to build up a fantastically huge Methodist congregation in the southeast side of Houston, during a real bad recession during the early 80s.
- S** Sam Brannon 09:53
My father started going to this to St. Paul's Episcopal Church and I loved it. I love the Episcopal Church. I love the ritual. I love the feeling of it. [During the] paschal season, we went to Maundy Thursday service. I gotta tell you, they get it. Oh, man, they get it. Everybody was crying and it was amazing.
- M** Mary Wilson 10:27
Those must have been very moving services.
- S** Sam Brannon 10:29
Yeah, it was an amazing service. I distinctly remember, to this very day thinking, "If I'm going to pursue Christianity as my faith, this is going to be the way I'm going to do it."
- S** Sam Brannon 10:53
Fast forward several years, and the other part of this is, I developed a very nasty drinking habit in my teen years and got put into a rehab facility in my teen years. By the time I got into the Navy after high school, I just had enough. It was terrible. My drinking just spiraled out of control. I picked up a heavy telephone and dialed a local anonymous 12 step group. I haven't had a drink since then and I've been active in that program since then.
- M** Mary Wilson 11:48
Yeah, I mean, as a pastor, I know many stories and understand how difficult that can be, so hats off to you there. I know it's not an easy road.
- S** Sam Brannon 12:01
Well, you got to give it to my mother who decided that instead of putting me into an alternative prison reform school, she put me into treatment. I thought it was the easier,

gentler thin - the easy way out. It turned out, they ruined my drinking.

S

Sam Brannon 12:24

Because I knew what I was inside. I could never take a drink without thinking to myself, "You know, I think this whole alcoholism thing may be real."

S

Sam Brannon 12:36

So, it was really easy for me to find my way into the 12 step programs. The other part of that was my mother was a chemical dependency nurse. She was always bringing home her recovery friends and all this kind of stuff. Those people were crazy, they were nuts, but I loved them so much and they were so good to me.

S

Sam Brannon 13:00

All that being said - kind of in a brief couple of minutes - all of that kind of killed up the soil for when I was young, a very young man in the military, knowing that the military was not going to be a career path for me, just doing my duty trying to do every day until I got out because I hated it - I did it though. I was reading scripture on a regular basis. While all my buddies were doing the crazy stuff in the bars, I was either going to some type of 12 step meeting or I was at church on Sundays or reading scripture and praying. I did a lot of that.

M

Mary Wilson 13:53

So, eventually you found your way to a seminary?

S

Sam Brannon 13:57

I did. I went to college directly. I left the Navy in December of '95 and I went directly into college January of '96. So, there was no stop.

M

Mary Wilson 14:10

And did you go to seminary right out of college?

S

Sam Brannon 14:12

I did. When I was in college, I ended up getting involved with a campus ministry and it was fantastic. The campus pastor, Pastor Luke Lesner, who was actually more of a chaplain,

was just very patient and tolerant with me — and he needed to be — and I [was] still very much a young man and very immature in many ways.

S

Sam Brannon 14:23

He sat down with me every Wednesday afternoon in the quiet of his study and listened to me and asked me to do some some personal work, where I did some writing about my relationship with my father, and it was cathartic. There was some cathartic stuff going on there.

M

Mary Wilson 15:18

So he was a real mentor and guide?

S

Sam Brannon 15:22

Absolutely. He helped us learn how to pray, he gave us the ins and outs in the background of liturgy, and why it was, what it was, and it was a fantastic experience. Honestly, none of that would have happened had I just not happen to answer an ad in the paper that asked for a quiet, serious student.

S

Sam Brannon 15:44

I went to this place - this is a house up on the hill, about not even a quarter mile from the school. It was an old farmhouse that had been renovated and this very nice man said, "This is where you live, and you have full access to everything," and I said, "Jim, I can't live here. It's too expensive," and he [said], "Just give me \$250 a month until you graduate." My other roommate happened to be the guy who was in campus ministry, and he kept inviting me - it could be a great book one day.

M

Mary Wilson 16:21

Yes, yes. I'm so glad that I'm getting to hear this side of you. Our paths have crossed some, but [we have] never had a chance to sit down and chat like that and hear that part of your story.

M

Mary Wilson 16:36

As I think about being a minister and doing pastoral care and knowing that addiction

shows up often in our congregations, knowing that divorce is very prevalent, of course, in our families and our congregations - how have your experiences shaped you in terms of offering pastoral care as you encounter families that may have similar type of things going on in their life that they personally experienced?

S

Sam Brannon 17:06

I've had to be very careful - just for the sake of transparency - and I'm completely okay with being transparent - one of my greatest character defects is a reluctance to be close to people, believe it or not. It's actually quite easy for a pastor to not be close to people, you can put up all kinds of walls and barriers and put on all sorts of false fronts and actually do very well in ministry. I've seen it before.

S

Sam Brannon 17:47

Nevertheless, the reason I say that is because I have had to work intentionally to get close to people. I have been very careful about the ways I get close to people - "What are my boundaries? Where does Sam start and where does Sam end? Where does this relationship start and where does it end?" I've had to be real careful.

S

Sam Brannon 18:13

One of the things that I made a commitment to do was [that] I wasn't going to be the AA pastor, who goes in there and talks all about alcoholism all the time. I was also not going to share lots of personal stories in my pastoral care and in my preaching, especially because I just don't think it's necessary. I don't think it's always helpful.

S

Sam Brannon 18:49

There needs to be a place where the pastor stops and the congregation starts. Anyway, to try to answer your question there - when I come into situations where there's a divorce going on, the thing I can tell people is that - I can tell them all sorts of things, but what I don't lead with is "I'm the child of a divorced family, and therefore" - I don't lead with that. The same thing goes with alcoholism. Right now, I have a parishioner who is in dire straits and alcoholism is a part of it, I know it is, but the best I can do for her is that, "Hey, there might be something there to look at." The last thing I'm gonna do is say, "And by the way, I know lots and lots about this because I am one and look how great I am," you know?

M

Mary Wilson 20:02

I think I read one time [that] for pastor we can share from scars, but not open wounds. We balanced that need to be human to our conversations, and yet not be the focus necessarily. I was just gonna kind of jump to now and then ask, in the midst of this pandemic, and limited interactions and challenges that you've mentioned, how has the pandemic affected your pastoral care practices? What have you done during this time?

S

Sam Brannon 20:56

First of all, I want to say that this has been one of the most challenging things I've ever gone through. Everything that we once did is now on its head. I was telling someone, the other day, if you really wanted to kick the church in the shin, a global pandemic is the way to do it. The number one thing we do, when times get tough, is we come together and pray in-person, face to face, we come together, we pray. And we can't do that.

S

Sam Brannon 21:44

At the beginning, especially when cases were skyrocketing - we have at this point, the cases in our part of the state are actually going down - we made a decision to have an outdoor service. It's not necessary that people way outside, far away have to wear masks. We have an indoor service at 10 a.m. and masks are required. We have particular rules about who sits where and how they serve and all that.

M

Mary Wilson 22:19

Yeah, and when did you start doing some of these more in-person services?

S

Sam Brannon 22:25

We made a commitment as a council. The council has been very supportive, by the way, it's been really nice. We made a commitment, as a council, to suspend in-person worship until there had been a constant two-week decline in active COVID cases, in Bastrop and surrounding counties.

S

Sam Brannon 22:54

At the beginning, we shut down for eight weeks, it was a long time. Then we came back together and we started worshipping outdoors and that was fun. That was a lot of fun. That was during the spring, going into the summer. Then right after was Memorial Day, when

everybody went out and got crazy, we had to stop it again because cases started skyrocketing. We missed most of June and July and then cases started going back down again. August we started meeting together again. That's when we instituted indoor worship because it was August and it was hot.

M

Mary Wilson 23:45

How did you do outdoor services in the 100 degree weather that we have here?

S

Sam Brannon 23:49

Well, at 8 a.m, things aren't so bad. They aren't as bad, but we had one outdoor worship service two weeks ago. It's been three weeks now, it was just hot. Oh my gosh, it was just so muggy. I had my chalice and my cap in there with a couple of little wafers in there to have something to pick up, and we had communion [and were] using those little plastic communion kits. Anyway, so I say the words of intention, I put the stuff down and I pick up the the little wafers - and if they couldn't be any worse, I put them in my mouth and they were soggy from the from the moisture in the air.

M

Mary Wilson 24:38

Oh, wow.

S

Sam Brannon 24:40

It was horrid. It was horrid.

M

Mary Wilson 24:44

Well, how has your congregation, you think, experienced pastoral care during this time and ministry and being community?

S

Sam Brannon 24:55

Well, let's take that into pieces because you had already asked about the pastoral care piece, and that's important, and then we'll talk about the community's life. So, let's talk about a few things.



Sam Brannon 25:08

The good news about the community I served is that because they went through the "valley of the shadow of death" for almost 10 years they learned how to care for themselves, in a way that I have not seen in any other community before. It's because we had some very dedicated servants, who just really pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, and went in there and started doing the work of ministry. Some of it was misguided. Some of the preaching was not great.



Sam Brannon 25:44

Nevertheless, they know how to take care of themselves. My role, as I went in there was to ask them, "Who needs pastoral care, what's going on here?" I did a lot of listening. That's kind of carried over. I really, truly rely on the community to help me identify who is in dire straits, who's got things going on that need to be attended to, and who's going to benefit from the pastor visiting.



Sam Brannon 26:23

This is really important - who would not benefit from the pastor visiting because there's some folks out there that, at one time, in particular, somebody went through some really wild stuff. They said, "Pastor, it's very important that you don't go visit this person at this point, for several reasons."



Sam Brannon 26:42

Anyway, I trust this community to tell me what they need. The challenge of pastoral care is that I can't really be face to face inside. So, I have been meeting outdoors with some people, like one guy who's going to chemo right now, he's got liver cancer and I meet with him on his porch, and we'll stay far away and I'll keep a mask on and he'll tell me about the "rat poison" he takes. We talk and then we'll pray and we have community together.



Sam Brannon 27:26

We'll do things in a way that's smart and safe, but there's some folks [that] I don't even want to go anywhere near. One guy, he's over 85, his wife is in a bad way, she's already on hospice. I'm scared to death, but I [if] go in there and [I could] somehow inadvertently kill people.

M

Mary Wilson 27:49

That's a heavy load to carry. Do you feel like you have that responsibility or burden. Well, before we started recording, you were mentioning that just personally, in your home, things are kind of wild and different. You've got this challenging way of ministry going on right now and home life is disrupted. How is all that working for you?

S

Sam Brannon 28:21

Well, it's working because my wife knows how to make it work. She's a list maker, she makes lists, that's what she does. She's been doing this since she was in high school, at least, maybe even earlier. She works with a good old fashioned spiral notebooks, and she's just got thousands of them. She filled them up. She's really good at keeping the family in order. I really rely on her to tell me what needs to happen around here because I can't keep my head around everything that she does. A lot of the time I come home and she's kind of like first sergeant and she's like, "I need you to get x, y and z done right now," and my role is to say, "Okay, just got to get this done" because she knows what needs to be done, I don't. I'm working on taking care of a whole congregation of people — all their all their emotional needs are there, all their spiritual needs are there, and I'm doing that. I really rely on Emily to organize things here so that when I come home, I can be of use to her.

M

Mary Wilson 29:43

So, a term that I have heard all my career was good self-care in the midst of this, just to being a pastor in general, but I suspect some of that is heightened at this time. How is that? How are you experiencing self care? What are you doing for that and how does that change?

S

Sam Brannon 30:08

Well, the first thing is, I told you, I'm a member of some anonymous 12 step group. I had trouble making in person meetings for a number of years, actually because everything I do is so quick, all the hours are so crazy. As a minister, you never know when [someone] is gonna call and say, "I need you at the hospital," which is something I can't do right now, by the way and that's all right, that's another piece of pastoral care. I have to call the friends, my friends who are chaplains to go and spend time with people in the hospital. To answer your question, though, because of this COVID situation, I have had to really rely on Zoom for my recovery meetings.

S

Sam Brannon 31:09

What I'm finding is that I'm really becoming stronger because of it. I'm actually attending more meetings. I have picked up membership into a group of recovering clergy and it's kind of neat because we've created this group of clergy. The fundamental requirement is that you can identify as an alcoholic or recovering alcoholic, or have a problem with alcoholism. But beyond that, it's not a regular meeting. It's more of like a walk alongside kind of thing, so we can talk about "What are the challenges of being a pastor, a rostered pastor in this case?" or a priest, if you will, because we've opened it up - "what are the challenges of having a personal recovery thing going on? While you're being a pastor?" That's been real neat and none of that would have happened, had COVID not come along.

M

Mary Wilson 32:15

I think my questions have tended to focus on where the challenges are, and less where the pluses have been and you've certainly identified one. Are there others that you can name in that way?

S

Sam Brannon 32:32

I came across an article — it was on medium, which is a platform that I read, different authors and so forth. There was this guy who — he did — I think the title of the article was, "be prepared for the gaslighting of the century, as the voices all tell you to get back to normal."

S

Sam Brannon 33:03

This was right in the middle of the shutdown and this guy was thinking way into the future. So, I hit the point of his article was, you know, if you're going to have to go through this kind of thing, instead of just wanting to get back to normal and instead of just focusing on, "let's just get back to normal," focus instead on what's going on right now, what transformative things are happening right now. That when we do end up on the other side of COVID-19 that we're better than we were before.

S

Sam Brannon 33:42

It was a great outlet. I sent that article out, naturally got a couple of people upset because it sounded kind of liberal and then I put that into my sermons. I put that into some of my "I needed to tell you about this," and I put it into my daily devotions.

- S** Sam Brannon 34:04
When we aren't meeting, when we are not meeting weekly, I was doing daily devotions on Facebook or staying in front of people like that. That's important, but I would talk about, "What's going on right now, in the midst of your life, in the midst of this lockdown in the midst of the COVID-19, in the midst of trying to be a teacher to your kids that you never wanted to be in the first place? What kind of transformation is happening right now?" Because the Holy Spirit's at work, I guarantee it.
- S** Sam Brannon 34:40
I try to encourage the community to be aware of that. When we're talking about the positives of this, I think it has given us an opportunity to be more intentional about living because everything that was once normal has been thrown into disarray.
- S** Sam Brannon 35:10
I've been very, very concerned about the people I serve because I know for certain that there is a general sense of malaise and depression and simmering anger out there. I may, on Wednesdays, make a few phone calls for a particular guy I'd like to get elected. When I make phone calls - and they're all local - they're all in my little area, nowhere else. I'm not mixing the church in my particular political bent, but what I've noticed is almost everybody I talked to, [there is] just a general sense of of malaise. I feel like Jimmy Carter in a cardigan right now, but you remember how he gave the general sense of malaise speech on TV? Man, we're right there. We are right there. It's happening again.
- M** Mary Wilson 36:24
How would you identify where that comes from? Do you think it's a combination of a political environment and the pandemic or do you think the pandemic is contributing to more of it? How did you see it? How are you experiencing it?
- S** Sam Brannon 36:40
I think it's like the perfect storm. You remember that movie, The Perfect Storm? You have like three low pressure systems hit at the same time, and they were combined to create this mega killer storm. I think we're right there. I think you've got a president who works on rage and scare tactics, and agitation and that's his M.O. and you've got a pandemic at the same time, those two things alone will be enough.

S Sam Brannon 37:14
Then there's also a kind of a discussion that was going on before, before any of this. I mean, [that] was right under the surface. A very general sense of discontent was there.

S Sam Brannon 37:35
You take all these things and you put them together, and it's just like being in the washing machine on the spin cycle and everybody's wondering what the heck's going on. At church, it's vital that we face it, that we talk about it, but that there [also] is a voice of hope, amidst all of this. That's been the most challenging part. Where do we find our hope amidst all of this, the perfect storm?

M Mary Wilson 38:15
Where do you find it, for you?

S Sam Brannon 38:17
Well, my hope rests on nothing less than Jesus, in His righteousness. I can say that, but when I wake up in the morning and the voices are talking to me, telling me that this is the last day of our life, and we're going to have civil war in the streets, and we're going to all die from some terrible pandemic and all this kind of stuff, the thing I move to is the quiet place of the Spirit. If you take a minute and take a step back, yes, there are some really bad things going on. It's clear. I mean, you've got some really rough things happening and they are exacerbating other things. So, without going into lots of detail on that - the pandemic is exacerbating the politics, the politics is exacerbating the effects of the pandemic, and then there are underlying issues that we've had all along with racism and discontent, and so forth.

M Mary Wilson 39:39
And then there are people with liver cancer that are getting chemo -

S Sam Brannon 39:48
Yeah, so to answer your question - the best I've personally been able to do, in my own personal life, is spend quiet time with the Spirit and try to take a long distance view of things. If you look back through history, we have been through this before - as people, as human beings, we've been through things like this, it's just different this time because

you've got so many other factors that we've never dealt with, like instantaneous global networks of communication, which are amazing, because look what we can do exactly the same time. At the same time, you've got Alex Jones out there speaking into the ear of half my congregation and really causing a lot of anxiety and discontent.

M

Mary Wilson 40:46

That must be challenging to try to be a voice of hope and truth telling when you feel like there's someone who doesn't hold those values quite so highly, and yet is someone that is being listened to by, as you said, [by] several in your congregation. How do you balance that? How do you address that sort of thing?

S

Sam Brannon 41:12

One of the first things I noticed was that this idea of reasonable - there's nothing reasonable going on right now. Reasonable, I think happened in 1985, but it certainly isn't going on right now. We've got hurricanes and earthquakes and lightning and pandemics and authoritarianism around the world, and Donald Trump and Steve Bannon, and now there's nothing that is reasonable about any of these things.

S

Sam Brannon 41:52

To ask people, or to command them, or to shake your finger at them and say, "Be reasonable," I don't think that helps. I think naming the sin that is around us clearly and naming our part in it is helpful, but we always have to move beyond that.

S

Sam Brannon 42:15

Because if all we do is say, "Jesus fed 5,000," not including the women and the children, therefore, we should feed people too - that's the end of the sermon, there's no hope in that. There's no hope at all. That's just making another nice thing into another law.

S

Sam Brannon 42:36

So, when I'm up there, specifically on Sundays and I'm preaching, I have to remember to always bring it back around to "Where is the gospel of Jesus Christ? And where is it that we're being led into the freedom of service for others? How is it that we are being freed from our own selfish needs, demands for our own needs? And how is it that we're able to find where the spirit is leading us?"

- S** Sam Brannon 43:08
So, that we may be a part of building the kingdom of God on Earth. Honestly, sometimes I think I sound like a broken record. I just drive myself nuts, and I feel like I'm banging my head against the wall sometimes, but they keep me around.
- M** Mary Wilson 43:32
Good for them and you. Is there anything else that I have glossed over or that you had thought you wanted to say [if] we moved away from the topic and you didn't get back to it, anything you would like to add?
- S** Sam Brannon 43:49
I'll say one another thing and that is that we have to be able to equip the congregation, equip the assembly of people, equip the Assembly of God here. They hate it when I say something like that. I love it though. Working the Assembly of God, to carry the message, to carry the gospel of Jesus Christ into the world.
- S** Sam Brannon 44:29
When I do that, I have to give them what I got and I got to take a step back and then I got to let them take the football and run. Sometimes it's scary because I'm looking at some people going, "Yeah, you got it, you're really doing well," and then somebody over there is really fumbling the ball and is kicking somebody and I just can't go run over there and fix the thing. I have to watch that, thinking "Oh my god, I didn't tell you to do that. You totally took all of that wrong."
- M** Mary Wilson 45:07
I'm smiling because I think about times people have commented on a sermon or whatever it's like, "I'm not sure that's what I meant, but okay."
- S** Sam Brannon 45:17
Right, "I didn't say that!" This is a teaching opportunity for the church, I think we're in one of the greatest teaching opportunities of our lifetime. I stood up in front of the congregation the week, the Sunday after George Floyd was murdered - and he was murdered - and I stood up there in front of a lily White congregation that had zero Black faces in it and expressed to them that Black Lives Matter, and that if Black lives don't

matter, then no lives matter at all.

S

Sam Brannon 46:01

What's going on is there's an entire community of people who are asking you to pay attention to what's going on. I was able to express it in a way where the congregation got it. My president, who is Mr. Republican, loves Donald Trump said, "That was really good. You really expressed that in a way that made me appreciate it."

S

Sam Brannon 46:28

Of course, I was shaking on the inside. Then what I did is I said, "Look, I'm not going to require that you be a part of reconciliation, racial reconciliation in our community, but here's what I am going to do - I'm going to be a part of it. I'm going to be a part of racial reconciliation in this community and I would like you to come with me. If I'm alone, but if you want to come with me, we'll do this together."

S

Sam Brannon 47:03

I got invited to be [in a] group of religious leaders in the community, who stand between the people and the government, specifically the mayor and the police department. So, that if there's something that goes on, like a racially motivated killing, or something like that, with the police, especially that the community has somebody to go to where they can raise their beef. So, that hopefully, that serves as a pressure relief valve so that the city doesn't blow up in racial riots because I mean, we had people in little conservative, Elgin, Texas that were really ready to burn it all down. They were angry.

M

Mary Wilson 48:07

Who were they angry at?

S

Sam Brannon 48:11

The White police. The Black community in Elgin, like any Black community in small town Texas, was angry. We've identified some pieces here that need to be spoken about - that there are two White faces, and a number of Black faces and no Brown faces and there are a whole lot of Brown people in Elgin.

S

Sam Brannon 48:45

We're in the midst of that. I wanted to tell you that because I think it's vital that we don't sit this out. I was very clear with my counsel, I will not be sitting this out. I don't think I was a very good ally. I don't think I was a very good ally when the church was grappling with the acceptance of gay and lesbian pastors in the community. I was fumbling everywhere and I just didn't have the right words. I was too concerned about myself to really be a strong ally, but I have a chance here, and I'm not going to miss it. I just won't.

M

Mary Wilson 49:32

Well, thank you. That's really great to hear, how you have just stated very clearly to your congregation, who you want to be and what you want to do and inviting them to join you. I like the language you used there about inviting them to join you.

M

Mary Wilson 49:55

Sam, I appreciate your time today. I appreciate talking to you and getting the chance to hear more of your story. I think that probably concludes the interview that we need. I'll go ahead and turn off the record feature and then just close it down here.