

Interview with Pastor Robert B. Moreland: Leading a Multi-Ethnic Congregation

Q1. How long have you been the pastor of Sandy Lane?

A1. 7 years this year.

Q2. What were challenges you experienced due to race?

A2. The church was warm and welcoming to me. It's still a very inviting membership to this day. Some of the most uncomfortable experiences revolved around selecting musicians along with music selection. I had only really been active in three other predominantly black Baptists congregations. This meant certain spirituals like "Bread of Heaven, bread of heaven feed me til I want no more.." wasn't going to happen. I had already prepared for that. I like hymns anyway. What I hadn't prepared for was the (publicized) number of black men that would be killed by the hand of the police in the next few years of my pastorate. With my son entering driving age, it was something that truly concerned me. It was a burden that I felt the church should speak to and not ignore. I know many that disagree and feel that injustice should be ignored within the walls of the church. That, I feel, and it's a personal conviction, is inconsistent with the message of love to all people that is inseparable from the Gospel. Needless to say, it made for several awkward moments. But Sandy Lane can take it and I know we can grow together.

Q3. Was there ever any friction in the congregation due to the following political issues and events, and if so, how was the friction addressed:

- a. The death of George Floyd and the following riots**
- b. Collin Kaepernick and kneeling**
- c. Donald Trump's presidency**
- d. The reality and seriousness of COVID-19**

A3. Unfortunately, I most likely lost some regular attending members during this period. I wasn't pushing a social gospel by any means, but I couldn't endure the silence from many evangelicals as people around the world stood together in unity against what the world seemed to agree was inhumane treatment. George Floyd in particular brought out a passionate plea from my pulpit for true Christian love for another member of the human race, and most importantly, a child of God. I did catch a few startled faces. I tried to preface those moments with heartfelt apologies for those that would consider them inappropriate or offensive. But I couldn't be as preemptive all the time as some liturgical expression is extemporaneous as well as Spirit-led. So I began to see and accept that for many church people, this issue is very divisive and inflammatory. Despite that fact, America's original sin and its residue won't magically disappear by mere avoidance. I began to see and accept that some topics surrounding injustice and racism are just too much for some good church people. It is what it is. For true salvation, a Christian must resolve that in the flesh dwelleth no good (righteous) thing. White flesh is not better than black and black flesh is not better than white. We are utterly dependent on the work of Christ on the cross of Calvary for our righteousness.

Q4. What are some successes your congregation has experienced as it relates to this topic?

A4. We have had several families of different races come together in unity and worship the Lord of us all. It's a wonderful thing to see black and white, Hispanic, and Asian individuals holding hands and praying together for our country. Those are the times that I have so much hope that the church in America can show the world that the love of Christ can conquer this country's longest internal struggle. I believe the church is truly the key to the continued success of America.

Q5. In what ways can Sandy Lane be a model for other congregations striving to be multi-racial?

A5. The white members voted me in as their first black pastor, unanimously. I didn't expect that and was truly pleased and grateful to God for the opportunity to be used anywhere in God's service. Hopefully, they could see that. Their receptiveness was refreshing and so appreciated. Sandy Lane is indeed a loving congregation. So there must be a willingness to embrace someone of a different culture and background. There must be an awareness that God gave His Son to die for the sins of all humanity no matter the racial type. So I mentioned that the music ministry served and continues to serve as an opportunity for compromise, learning and mutual respect of cultural differences. In most black churches, you can hear the music before you enter the church itself. There is a vigor that accompanies many Negro spirituals that is unique and exciting. This can be attributed to taste, upbringing, the historical prohibition of reading for slaves, and more. The fact is that we need to learn to co-exist and worship together in the church. So there has to be a compromise and a balance. We sing hymns and we sing praise and worship songs. Depending on the Sunday, we may sing along with a CD, or we may have a

pianist. Again, there must be compromise and periods of change. Similar to any healthy family environment, no one member gets to choose what's for dinner every day of the week. I think a homogenous church culture in some ways becomes unintentionally closed-minded and selfish. I view this as another opportunity for sacrifice that one believer is willing to endure for the sake of another brother or sister in Christ. An example of how diversity is a strength is our witnessing team. Sandy Lane's witnessing team is a mixed group, so we can go to any neighborhood and talk to anyone about the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Every person has value and every soul is eternal with a need to know the Savior.

Q6. What is the vision for the church as it relates to its being multi-racial?

A6. My vision is to be the church that the Bible speaks of, made up of all types of people, joined (baptized) by the Holy Spirit into one body. I know it's a cliché, but variety is the spice of life. The mandate for the disciples to go to the uttermost parts of the earth tells me that God appreciates differences and accepts praise from the four corners of the earth. And every kind of people will indeed praise Him. Belief in Christ is what unifies us.

Q7. What Scriptures and or theological beliefs do you rely on in pursuit of that vision?

A7. There are many, but here are a few that get frequent rotation in my sermons:

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abrahams's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:27-29)

This passage more than most tells me that God

seeks for unity among all believers no matter the individual differences. I can appreciate what makes me stand out and what makes all peoples uniquely different, but I can't elevate any one culture or anything above the unifying belief in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Are we willing to admit that this very mistake has been made? Another passage I love to recite finds itself at the end of the book:

After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands: And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. (Revelation 7:9-10)

Q8. Is there any particular church model you try to follow, rather from Scripture or other churches?

A8. I can appreciate what Tony Evans has accomplished at his church in Dallas. The congregation is largely black but does have other races in attendance every Sunday (Pre-COVID). Sort of on the flip side, retired Pastor Charles Stanley always managed to have a mixed congregation in Atlanta, although more white than black. Serving the community that you're in, will in many ways dictate the racial majority, but having a welcoming spirit and valuing each individual visitor will undoubtedly result in diversity within the congregation.

Q9. There are obvious differences in how black and white Christians worship; what are some general experiences, histories, and world views of each group that affect the worship style of each group?

A9. I feel I've already addressed this issue earlier but I said this:

"I had only really been active in three other

predominantly black Baptists congregations. This meant certain spirituals like 'Bread of Heaven, bread of heaven feed me til I want no more..' wasn't going to happen." If you're African American and active in a black church, you most likely are aware of the song. Now imagine, a church with a mixed congregation and a deacon stands up and starts singing that song and everybody in the church knows it and starts singing. Negro spirituals are a part of American History. Culturally, it should be embraced by the church as a whole. One of the most interesting things I've seen lately is a Korean singing group named Korean Soul that has mastered many popular African American Gospel songs. And they're good. Would that be conceivable in an SBC near you? It should be.

Q10. What are your views on Critical Race Theory?

A10. In general, aspects of CRT can be helpful as long as it's not hijacked by other theories and/or movements. For example, race and sexual preference are not the same issue and should not be held together under the concept of race. I oppose racism, but I don't think that all opposition to racism must come under the umbrella of CRT. As concerning the church, CRT or parts of CRT that concern church history could be helpful if listeners are willing to learn. Initially I didn't like the idea of CRT beyond academia because I felt like it was an intellectualized suite of knowledge that could inadvertently serve as a larger distraction from the specific problem of race in the church, as well as America. Maybe that's what is going on today in the SBC. To me, it gave opponents of those who actually desired to address racial bias a chance to pick apart too broad an idea. One that included Marxist leanings and distinct political aspects that more conservative groups consider offensive. I've changed somewhat on that, but the truth is, I would prefer the major conventions and churches just acknowledge that it has

historically discriminated against brothers and sisters in the faith based upon their race. There are consequences that we are dealing with today because of bad choices of church leaders in the past. And we can't ignore it, but we must deal with it and heal together. There is enough evidence in the Bible itself to support a faith that is conscious of social injustice and fights to defend the trodden down, poor, and those who are dealt with unfairly. Paul himself sought justice when he was unjustly beaten and thrown in prison:

But Paul said unto them, They have beaten us openly uncondemned, being Romans, and have cast us into prison; and now do they thrust us out privily? nay verily; but let them come themselves and fetch us out. (Acts 16:37)

Unless we, the church, agree as a whole to deal with our racist history (no matter what label you put on it), movements like the BHI will continue to grow amidst the exodus of people of color from our churches.

Q11. Currently, the Southern Baptist Convention is trying to be more welcoming to black churches; what advice would you give to the SBC in this effort?

A11. Zacchaeus promised to pay back four-fold all those that he had stolen from via tax fraud (Luke 19:8). If the SBC is really serious about being more welcoming to black churches, they should not ignore past wrongs. They should be more aggressive in offering scholarships to those qualified applicants of black churches specifically in the South. They should also invest in hiring professors that are able to institute classes that emphasize the contributions of people of all races in Christian history. This would help everyone and bring about a fuller, more well-rounded history of our faith while simultaneously diminishing racism. For example, church history should include classes that discuss the Ethiopian Church, the Armenian Church and the Egyptian

Coptic Church in depth before examining the mass of information featuring European Christian history. These other non-European people had Christianity first. This would hopefully help scrub certain preconceived notions of Christianity's origins off the minds of more seasoned Christians and help prevent the next generation from suffering from the same plight.

Q12. What associations, conventions, etc. are Sandy Lane members of, which one most benefits your church's vision (as it relates to this topic), and why do you say?

A12. Well, I have to say that it's pretty hard to find a truly mixed association. The National Baptists are predominantly black, which was my history. I neglected to say that Sandy Lane was and chose to remain Independent Fundamental Baptist even though I had graduated from Southwestern which of course is Southern Baptist. This was not much of an obstacle considering the tenets of the conservative leadership at Southwestern at the time lined up well with core IFB beliefs. But that's an interesting diversion I can elaborate on at another time. I did attend a major IFB Conference a couple of years after accepting the pastorate at Sandy Lane. I enjoyed my time there and met some really nice brothers and sisters in the Lord. It was in South Carolina and was a full week so I new it wouldn't be something a small but growing church would have the finances to do every year. With all that being said, I don't think there is a major Baptist association that would necessarily match the makeup of the church. To make things even more challenging, I'm a 'tent-making' pastor so I work outside the church as well, and with studying, preaching, teaching and parenting, I really don't have that much time to devote to many meetings and gatherings. I also believe that neglecting the home for the church can have significant negative consequences. I was taught that the Pastor's first ministry is his home. With all that being said, I would still entertain the idea of joining an association with

similar core doctrinal beliefs that would allow Sandy Lane's members the opportunity for fellowship and Christian education. So I am not opposed to associative prospects in the future. I truly believe that my members will be able to fellowship with a brother or sister of any economic status and/or race. It's a wonderful church.