

Beloved community: Trinity UCC's Otis Moss III

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Trinity United Church of Christ on the South Side of Chicago has received a great deal of media attention because one of its members is presidential candidate Barack Obama. The head pastor of the 8,000-member church is Otis Moss III, 36, a graduate of Yale Divinity School, who recently took over the day-to-day leadership of the church from Jeremiah Wright. Moss is the son of Otis Moss Jr., longtime pastor of Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, who served with Martin Luther King Jr. at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

How would you explain Trinity UCC's stance of being "unashamedly black" to someone who didn't understand that emphasis?

I would begin by suggesting that a church that is "unashamedly black, unapologetically Christian" is no different from a Korean Presbyterian church or a Greek Orthodox church or a German Baptist church at which an ethnic or national identity is paired with a Christian identity. Unfortunately, in America, we have this idea that "black" is just a color, unconnected to culture or nation. Most people of African descent in this country don't have the privilege of knowing exactly where in Africa they come from. We can't have a Ghanaian Christian Church, but we do desire to give people a sense of pride in their heritage. The problem, of course, is that because of underlying and partly unconscious racial fears in our society, if you say that you are "unashamedly black," that must mean that you are "anti-white." That's not the case.

As Trinity UCC has come into national prominence, at least in part because of Obama's campaign, how do you manage the media attention?

It is both a frustration and an opportunity. I think of what Joseph said to his brothers, "What you intended for evil, God meant for good." We can use this as an opportunity to educate people. There are always going to be people who are "hating on you" no matter what you do. If we said nothing, people would criticize us. That's the reality.

The frustrating part is that there are people who are part of a propaganda machine, and they are not interested in dialogue or morality or building bridges. They are interested in political spin, and they use something that is good and wholesome and holy to put out misinformation.

For you, as a pastor, what are the signs that things are going well at Trinity?

There are the superficial things—things like membership and tithing. But we really look to see how people are connecting with Christ. Are they developing a strong connection between their identity as people of color and the principles of their faith? That's crucial to us.

We are an action-oriented, prophetic, witnessing congregation. So for us there is the question of critical engagement with issues of class, race and gender. We also have to deal with the painful issues facing our young people and speak out about them. We're seeing in our church an outpouring of support for refugees from Darfur, many of whom are now a part of our congregation. And we are seeing a lot of support for our hospice program. This is critical for our community because we've had a tendency to believe that if you say the word *hospice* you are giving up on your faith that God will heal you. So I see this as a sign of growth.

How do you define a faithful life?

It happens in several dimensions. There is the internal personal dimension: the spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation. Then there is the critical-thinking dimension: how are you developing your mind? And indispensably, for us, there is the question of your connection to the community. If Jesus' inaugural sermon is, "The Spirit of the Lord has come upon me to preach good news to the poor," then how are we doing that? Are we setting the captives free? Are we opening the eyes of the blind? We have to challenge people to make faith more than a footnote in their lives, to make it the primary chapter of their lives. This is especially difficult in the American context, where a market culture convinces people to push faith to the margins.

Would you describe a difficult pastoral moment or a moment of personal struggle?

One of the greatest teaching moments for me was when I was 26 years old and I moved from Denver to Augusta, Georgia, for my first church. I felt the call; I was excited about ministering. I got there and found that everyone in the congregation was over 65. One day I spoke at Payne College and tried to convince some young people to come to our church. They said to me flat out, “We like you, but we don’t like your church.” That pained me so. Here I was, feeling called, and yet in a place where I just didn’t fit. It was pure generational conflict, and my own immaturity played into it. I would say things that members of the congregation just didn’t get and make references they didn’t understand. They would say things I didn’t understand.

Eventually, some members of the congregation who didn’t like the direction I was going decided to sue me and sue the church. There were so many days when I didn’t even want to stand in the pulpit. But many people in the church loved me through that painful time, and I was able to grow.

How is pastoring different for you than it was for your father’s generation?

A key piece is embracing and using the technology in a completely different way. My father is my hero. There is no one else that I look to for a model of ministry and prophetic preaching. But I’ve often had an argument with him on this topic. My dad’s generation did not embrace television the way it might have. It left that medium to the prosperity gospel preachers. That means that an entire generation has been raised and educated by the Benny Hinns and the Creflo Dollars of the world. If my father’s generation had embraced television, then the standard bearers of that medium would be preachers who emphasize hope for the poor instead of those who treat Jesus as a cosmic bellhop. Now we have to play catch-up. They have both the microphone and the megaphone.

But what really challenges me in my father’s generation is its ability to preach the power of the love of God. We can preach justice, mercy, faith—but people are afraid of love. *Agape, philia, eros*—all of it. Love that forces communication. Love that engages the people who demonize you. My father’s generation raised the bar on love. The Kingian idea of the beloved community is one that we pull out now only for King Day, I guess. Otherwise it is lost. We have to struggle with it. Love will force you to change your doctrine and to engage those who hate you. People don’t want to do that.

Where do you see yourself in ten years?

Provided they don't throw me out of Trinity next week and I don't find myself working down the street at the gas station, I see myself just preaching the gospel. We've got to build a community of love and of commitment. We've got to work toward eliminating poverty and transforming our culture's relationship to race and gender. I hope to see a rise in marriage and to engage people in the problems of juvenile justice so that fewer African-American boys are incarcerated. We've got to work toward both internal and structural transformation.

I've heard you mention your appreciation of Zora Neale Hurston. Could you say why she is an important inspiration for you?

Hurston was one of the few people who came out of the Harlem Renaissance who loved African-American culture on its own terms. She didn't view it through the Western Enlightenment idea of "folk culture." She loved the people and she understood their faith. She saw the amalgamation of Christian and African faith, and she conveyed it in her writing. I love *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which she captures the beauty and power of African-American dialect. It's a book you almost have to read aloud to hear the rhythms. I love the sermons she records in *The Sanctified Church* and the stories she collects in *Mules and Men*. I am surprised by how often she creeps into my own preaching.