

Community News

Word and Life: Confronting Racism Series

Revealing the Healing Power of African American Music

By Maura Conlon-McIvor / Special to VOICE

REV. DR. DAVID N. MOORE, author, ecumenical teacher, and lead pastor of New Covenant Worship Center in Santa Barbara, opened Word and Life's new *Confronting Racism* series by speaking to the January 6th, Washington D.C. white supremacist attacks, saying, "I know we hear the refrain 'this is not America.' But it would be better for us to say—'this is not who we want to be.'"

Moore suggested we gain perspective into 'who we want to be' by recognizing "the parallels between the Holocaust in Germany and the kidnapping and ethnic cleansing of indigenous peoples in this country and Africans brought to these shores." He evoked the words of anti-Nazi German theologian, Martin Niemoller, who wrote: "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."



Dr. David N. Moore

He also cited the anti-Nazi theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who arrived in the U.S. in the early 1930s as a fellow at New York's Union Theological Seminary. Bonhoeffer came to understand the Nazi's persecution of Jews, "viewing it through the lens of American Blackness." Inspired by the preaching of Adam Clayton Powell Sr., founder of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church, Bonhoeffer traveled the American South, not impressed by White Christianity. The theologian introduced the Jesus of Black America to his German counterparts "through music, through vinyl, through records. He played... Black Church music, including the spirituals in the African American tradition to people who, for the most part, didn't even speak English."

According to Moore, Music of the African American Church captures "the pathos, the struggles, the hopelessness, the despair of humanity and introduces hope into that experience." Negro spirituals thus were critiques of the White Jesus. Moore reflected upon theologian Howard Thurman—whose book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* is requisite reading for the Word and Life series—and "how slaves employed this music in the interest of their own dignity." He added, "The music was code."

For instance, Moore shared how the song, *Wade in the Water*, refers to waters pointing north, "toward the Missouri River and other bodies of water that pronounced the way to escape." Moore, the only Black child in his Oxnard 5th grade class, grew up singing, *Go Tell it On the Mountain*. He realized only later that a Black man wrote the song around 1865, making it a song of emancipation. He added that during the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans were emboldened to reveal the code calling for liberation.

Moore speaks to honoring the moral authority of African Americans and their contributions as a way to create further healing. He calls for the revision of K-12 education, for white families to share their secrets about race, as well as noting the current movement to revise ecumenical curriculum.

Such activities could start a collective healing. "We are afraid of healing," Moore asserted. "Healing goes along with a redistribution of power and... a redistribution of wealth... We don't see that as a good thing as a country. We see that as a net loss. The truth is, this is a win-win. It would be a net gain for our entire society to stop suppressing the voices of African Americans and other people of color. It would benefit our country."

He also noted that the average African American family holds one tenth the wealth of the average white family. According to the 2020 Census only 1.7 percent of the population in Santa Barbara County is African American. Moore cited how pastors serving the local Black community can't afford to live in town, often driving in from outlying cities.

"Imagine what it would be like," said Dr. Moore, "if we had a world of equality where nobody is better than the other, and we can treat each other as sisters and brothers."

Dr. Moore's call for social justice would lead to peace.

The Word and Life series "Confronting Racism," is open to the public, Thursdays, 10 to 11:30am through March 18th, 2021. www.wordandlife.us. Registration cost is \$67.