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The Continuing Significance of Pastors

In Honor of Rev. Dr. G. Daniel Jones

When we consider the life and work of the late Rev. Dr. G. Daniel Jones, we can see why faith communities and the pastors who lead them are still important.

We live in a world that with each passing day sees religion as a societal problem and not the solution to problems. Religious leaders are quoted saying bigoted and stupid things that have nothing to do with fact or truth. Too many religious leaders see their particular religious tradition not as a means to an end but rather as an end in itself. This is a dangerous tribalism that can lead to violence. Too many people who call themselves religious leaders sanction torture and war.

All too often in popular culture we see stereotypes of religious people as crazy. We especially see African-American preachers portrayed as insincere hustlers or some Rev. Lee who is tempted sexually by an irresistible vixen or a Rev. Éclair Chickenwing who shows up for Sunday dinner at a good sister's house and is only interested in the biggest piece of fried chicken.

We see television preachers who want their congregants and the people watching to buy them multi-million dollar jets. We see scandalous news about preachers who become entangled in inappropriate relationships with boys. The child abuse horror perpetrated by Catholic priests against children makes people want to turn away from the church and its pastors with disgust. And then there are the reality show preachers whose value system seems to be little different from that of the world that says that you are what you own.

It is little wonder that according to a recently released Pew study, fewer people call themselves Christian. It is little wonder that the religious landscape of America is changing bit by bit, and more people say they have no religious affiliation at all. They call themselves religious "nones." More people admit that they do not believe there is a God. Clearly, for many people, church as a faith community is no longer relevant. And if the church is not relevant, then the role of pastors as leaders and preacher/teachers of congregations no longer holds significance.

I say: the church and good pastors are still important.

On May 27, 2015, Rev. Dr. G. Daniel Jones, age 74, died suddenly of heart failure at his home in Wyncote, Pennsylvania. He was serving as interim pastor at Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia after his retirement from the pulpit of Grace Baptist Church of Germantown where he served as senior pastor for 31 years. Pastor Jones was my pastor, and he was pastor to my children as they grew to young adults within the Grace family. Even after I moved from Philadelphia, lived in other cities, joined other churches, and was pastored by other clergy, I still considered him my pastor in Philadelphia.

Pastor Jones was dedicated to pastoral work on all levels—the micro and the macro, near and far, local and global. He was a good shepherd to his flock, a teaching preacher who was more concerned with feeding his people the meat of the Word intended to bring his congregation to spiritual maturity

rather than telling feel good stories and serving up prosperity nonsense that is only the milk of the Word not able to grow mature believers. Further, he was a good head of household.

Faith communities are like families. We go through life together and share in both its joys and sorrows. We watch our children grow together; they and we establish life-long bonds as we attend countless church meetings and prayer meetings and bible studies and Sunday School classes, and choir rehearsals, and meetings for various auxiliaries and outreach ministries. We attend weddings and funerals and celebrate the birth of babies and baptisms and rites of passages together. We pray each other through our studies for becoming licensed in body work, and through studies for bachelor, masters and doctorate degrees. We work together in the kitchen and prepare food both at home and at church for countless events over the years. And, just as in all human organizations, there are times when we rub each other wrong.

A good pastor summons the faith, the grace, and the skill to invite the unction of Holy Spirit into such situations until the woundedness is healed. A good pastor knows how to strike a balance between the conservative members that every congregation needs who do not want to violate tradition and the progressive even radical members that every congregation also needs who know that in order for a tradition to maintain itself, it must change. The tradition ought not to attempt to put God in a box but rather allow new mercies to flow both inside and outside of the congregation itself.

Pastor Jones was such a leader. We disagreed more than once over the years, but we always had great respect for each other, and we knew that in the end, we would remain friends. Pastor Jones knew his parishioners, and he knew and cared about our families. Whenever I came back to Philadelphia after my children were adults and were no longer members of Grace, he never failed to ask about them. He knew how old they were and whether or not they had married.

Each one of his parishioners was important to him. He visited the sick and the shut-ins, was a regular presence in prayer meetings and preached the Sunday School lesson on Sunday morning. At the same time, he saw the need for the congregation to serve the community. It did this through the community center and various other outreach ministries that took root while he was pastor.

Such a schedule would be exhausting for most people, but Pastor Jones had energy and enthusiasm that could only have come from Holy Spirit. He was an adjunct professor in Christian education. He worked with churches on the national level through the American Baptist Churches, and he was involved with foreign missions through the Lott Carey Convention. In recognition of his contribution to the community, the City of Philadelphia named the 6400 block of Emlen Street between West Upsal and West Johnson Dr. G. Daniel Jones Way.

In October of 2014, his beloved wife Geraldine died. Hers was a life well-lived in her own right. She was a social worker who worked with, among other populations, people with AIDS. She lived most of her adult life in a wheel-chair, having been paralyzed in an automobile accident. Yet, she lived her life with grace and as far as I could see not a drop of self-pity. Her gentle and patient spirit was an inspiration to me. I joked with Pastor Jones that you never know a man until you have met his wife, and he was a better man because of Mrs. Jones. She was his glory.

Pastors such as G. Daniel Jones do not get media attention. They are not in front of the cameras and they answer questions only when called for comment. They do not seek fame. They are not

portrayed in the popular culture. There are no reality shows that follow pastors like him from hospital room, to home visit, to prayer meeting, to meeting with congregants to talk over their troubles, to his own study to prepare a lesson or a sermon. We do not see the hallway and parking lot conversations that may give someone the little bit of strength they need to make it to the end of the day with the blessed assurance that weeping may endure for the night but joy comes in the morning. There is no reality show television that shows good pastors in prayer or that shows us how a man like Pastor Jones was able to remain upbeat. I never saw him in a foul mood.

While the cameras do not, cannot, and ought not to follow good pastors who do the yeoman's work of ministry. Still, we ought not to forget that such pastors do exist. They are good shepherds, fishers of humanity, who put in the hard work of ministry day by blessed day. They touch the lives of countless people in positive ways because their teaching and work has a ripple effect. The world will always need such dedicated people.

Now that Pastor Jones has joined Mrs. Jones and they are both with the ancestors, we can only hope and pray that God will send women and men who are able and willing to continue the work of pastoral leadership with the same dedication as Pastor G. Daniel Jones.