

Raleigh Washington: Sanford Pastors Must 'Seize the Moment'

More than 15 months ago, pastors from around the country gathered near Sanford, Fla., for a historic meeting to attack the spiritual darkness of racism exacerbated by the tragic death of Trayvon Martin. Wednesday, pastors and national church leaders returned to the area to continue the battle less than three weeks after the acquittal of George Zimmerman.

Several local pastors who have been working behind the scenes to tackle the issue of race relations in Sanford were present in the offices of Charisma Media along with Promise Keepers President and CEO Dr. Raleigh Washington and Bishop Harry Jackson, senior pastor of Hope Christian Church and a leader of the High Impact Coalition. Pastors from Ohio, California and Georgia also attended the meeting to help start a racial reconciliation initiative.

Washington said the task of bringing racial harmony and unity to Sanford has only begun, and he reiterated his challenge to spiritual leaders to continue to "cross racial lines" to make it happen.

"You, as the leaders of the church here in Sanford, have the opportunity to seize the moment—the moment to establish genuine relationships that will bring about racial reconciliation here," Washington said. "Establishing genuine relationships across racial lines are what's going to make a difference. You cannot fall asleep at the wheel. Seize the moment."

Derrick Gay, pastor of Dominion Church International in Sanford, said the historical roots of racism are why the

separation of races continues today.

“Why don’t we talk? Why do we still have an issue with each other? Why don’t we like each other?” Gay asked. “Simply because of history. The answer is we need anointed leadership in place, where everyone will submit to that leadership. We need to make this a lifetime effort to link arms with each other.”

Joel Hunter, senior pastor of Northland Church, said that tide could be broken.

“The inertia of history can only be interrupted by relationship,” Hunter said. “There’s a difference between justice and law. ... Justice is something that only happens through relationship.”

Ron Johnson, pastor of One Church in Longwood, Fla., said, referring to racism, “To break this, it can’t happen by default. It has to happen by design.”

While riots and violent protests broke out in spots around the country in the days following the July 13 not-guilty verdict for Zimmerman, only peaceful protests were staged in Sanford.

“People are going to point to Sanford one day and say, ‘These people have learned to do it right,’” Washington said. “You, the leaders, have stayed on the battlefield and continued the challenge we gave you. Other cities simply don’t know how to deal with this issue.”

Sanford Pastors Connecting, a group of pastors formed after the initial meeting in April 2012, have met on a monthly basis and are building initiatives to bridge the racial gap in the community. Jackson said he hopes other communities follow Sanford’s lead.

“You are an example and a model. What would happen if we could replicate the concepts you have put in place here?” Jackson

asked. "We must continue to pray prayers that will touch black, white, Asian and Hispanic kids that are losing their way everywhere."