

Second Opinion: Johnnie Moore: Why I won't bail on the White House

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RNS — One Sunday night this summer, a particular White House staffer popped in my mind. The week before had been a bit tumultuous and I knew the hours this person was putting in were intense.

The staffer had put a life and livelihood on hold to fulfill a patriotic duty, and it had caused a massive adjustment for the family. This staffer isn't among the well-known employees in the building. In fact, this person is mainly invisible, working behind the scenes, pouring heart and soul into the work.

I've made it a habit to immediately act when someone suddenly pops in my head like this. As a Christian, we sometimes call this a "prompting of the Spirit."

So, I grabbed my cellphone, and I sent this note of encouragement to the person:

"I know another week begins tomorrow & it must feel like they all run together with all you're tasked to do. I just wanted you to know that I have prayed for you this Sunday night. I have asked God to give you strength & wisdom, favor with all people, & success in all you put your hand to. I have asked God to make sure you don't miss the meaning in your mission & that you'd find joy in the daily grind. You are so great & so good at what you do. You have every reason to have all the confidence in the world. It has been a special blessing to get to know you. God Bless you."



Rev. Johnnie Moore. Photo courtesy of Johnnie Moore via RNS.

Through my involvement with various members of this administration, and the campaign that preceded it, I've had countless such interactions and with so many people. Having been a pastor for a dozen years, I feel it is principally my spiritual responsibility to provide support to these people. I view it as a privilege and a responsibility to pray for them and assist them. Most of those interactions have been with people whose names and stories will never make the news. They just quietly do their work in service to their country. They are spouses and parents, sons and daughters, friends ... people like the rest of us.

As a member of the president's so-called evangelical advisory board, this is my primary responsibility for those who serve in the White House — to be a spiritual counselor.

Similarly, on the morning of the president's inauguration, I made a promise to the president which I was fortunate to scribble as a simple note in his Bible, just before the morning's private worship service at St. John's Church in Washington. I wrote, "Mr. President, not a day will go by when you aren't covered by thousands of prayers."

It's that same pastoral instinct that nearly all of us (evangelicals) drew from in response to the tragic events in Charlottesville earlier this month. It was

a time for national prayer, a time to condemn bigotry and a time for spiritual outreach in pursuit of national healing. It was a time for grace and for truth.

Then, I saw a celebrity tweet something like, “where are all the Christians condemning the white supremacists in Charlottesville?” I found it so strange because I couldn’t think of a single Christian leader who hadn’t spoken loudly, clearly and forcefully against it.

Unfortunately, we live in a world controlled by social media “clicks” that reduce complex moments into headlines and inadequate phrases shared with self-selected sets of friends that rarely include those who think differently than they do. We crawl into our silos of “likes” and we too easily turn the marketplace of ideas into marketing of our own hastily generated opinions.

This behavior facilitates our division rather than bridging it, and it robs us of objectivity and honesty. It makes us incapable of having the conversations needed to solve our problems. It makes us a kind of fundamentalist. It makes us intolerant. It robs us of love, compassion and understanding. It wars against our soul.

Yet, rather than discussing Charlottesville’s tragedy sensibly, we lapsed into vicious and judgmental rhetoric with no room for discussion. The president’s press conference was insensitive and some in the press editorialized their coverage of it. Most Americans didn’t watch the whole thing from beginning to end. Yet, everyone had an opinion. It was an important discussion begun at an inappropriate time in an inappropriate venue.

Then, America invested all her energy into fighting herself rather than healing herself, and as spiritual advisers to the White House we were numbered among those especially targeted.

It all reminded me of a few phrases I used to teach my students to prod them to think more deeply, discover the reasons for belief, and to not allow themselves to get too comfortable in their own preconceived notions. I provoked them to seek understanding and not simply to form opinions. I told them “not every reason has merit but everyone believes what they believe for a reason” and “everything is always more complicated than it seems.”

I often encouraged them to “never have a litmus test for friendship” and that “as soon as you think you have something figured out it’s probably the first sign that you probably have no idea what you’re talking about.” I warned them often of only having friends that “believe what they believe and think like they think” and I encouraged them “to take every chance they could to make a difference.” These days I would have added an additional phrase, “you don’t have to have an opinion on everything.”

I believe all these things and I think that’s why I never considered abandoning the administration for a single second, even as harassment from leftist activists increased after they published some of our personal contact information online. I wouldn’t back down for the same reason I wouldn’t have left President Obama or Secretary Clinton had they asked me to be an adviser, even though I largely disagreed with their policies.

You only make a difference if you have a seat at the table. There is a long list of progress we have made with this administration because we took our seat at the table. We’ve provided consequential feedback on policy and personnel decisions particularly affecting religious liberty, judges, the right to life and foreign policy. We are also actively at work on issues like criminal justice reform, and when we’ve disagreed, we’ve had every opportunity to express our point of view.

Yet, we are not responsible for whether we are able to make a difference, but whether we tried. Unlike business leaders with fiduciary

responsibilities that are subject to board members, clients, vendors, shareholders and suppliers, as a spiritual leader I must answer to God. I cannot leave my opportunity to make a difference. I will not.

The Rev. Johnnie Moore is a member of President Trump's evangelical advisory council and the board of directors of the National Association of Evangelicals. He has written seven books, including the forthcoming "The Martyr's Oath" (Tyndale, October 2017). The founder of The Kairos Co., a communications firm, he has taken up the cause of persecuted minorities in Iraq and Syria. Religion News Service published his column.