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Ritter, Leonard (Reverend)

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Reverend Leonard Ritter
Interviewer: Debbie Frost
July 17th, 2013
St. Helena, SC

DF: It is July 17th and we're interviewing pastor Ritter from the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Pastor, could you tell us a little bit about your church and the history of your church?

LR: Okay. Well, first of all, I was called here to pastor in the year of 1993, I came here to pastor. I reside in Anna Neal, South Carolina, where I lived basically all of my life. I am one of eight siblings. One has preceded us our parents, mother and father deceased, but never the less in my infant pastoring, I was called to come here to pastor and I've been here ever since 1993. Of course, in coming here to pastor it has been, I don't how to express it or explain, it has been a wonderful opportunity for me to grow spiritually. To get to know the people here on the island, of course. And it's been a wonderful experience for me here, to pastor here at Ebenezer Baptist Church. Now, as you said earlier, this year we are getting ready to celebrate our 129th anniversary and the pastor's 19th anniversary.

DF: Now, I know this church has a rich history in this community and you mentioned that you've only been here for nineteen years...

LR: Nineteen years.

DF: What difference does, I know that you live in Allentown-

LR: Allendale.

DF: Allendale, South Carolina and coming to St. Helena, what's the difference like?

LR: Well, it's very much different because of the fact that Allendale is like, as I said, about 65 miles North from here. We get to hear some of the things through the news media about different counties but not a whole lot. I wasn't exposed to a whole lot about, especially the island, St. Helena island I wasn't. But it's been, you know, coming here versus from where I grow up, I would say the difference like night and day, night and day. Where the people here around the city lived somewhat different from the way we lived, or people lived in Allendale County.

DF: In what way?

LR: Now, that could be hard to describe. Well, basically people here, I found, they learned to leave closely a knit among themselves. They are a close knitted people, close knitted family. They're very cultured people. They believe in the things that they've learned from their parents about the island. I think that most of the things that are generated around the culture their taught from Penn Center. In here is a long history, Penn Center, very rich history about our culture as well. But the difference in the people and getting back to the lifestyle, the people here, they learned over the years to live from the sea. One of their main commodities in surviving was living from the sea. They fished, they shrimped, they did the crabbing and all of those sorts of things they did. And I guess doing that, you know, incorporating one's lifestyle would be somewhat different from a person who lived more inland.

DF: And we talked also about maybe even a language difference. I mean, you're only a few miles up the road but...

LR: Well, you know, the language, yeah. I've been here, like I said, I've been pastoring in this community for nineteen years and I haven't been able to speak the Gullah language yet. I don't know whether I have the dialect but nevertheless I would say that people from Allendale their language is somewhat different from the language the people speak here on the island, the more, you know, the Gullah Geechee sound. I guess, how would you say that as a teacher, mixed language or something?

DF: Yeah.

LR: Yeah.

DF: English and a little something else that they incorporate to be able communicate. And it's very rich here.

LR: It is very rich, very rich.

DF: We've done several interviews on the island and one major piece was just some of their traditions and really in the acquired land itself, on this land. I mean, I know its been a push in the community to maintain that richness and those traditions, what traditions do you see are in front of they have the Gullah festival here and could you share a little bit about what that means from your view and from the church?

LR: Well, the Gullah- what did you say?

DF: The Gullah festival.

LR: The Gullah festival, yeah. At one time, originally it started they have the festival here on the island. They moved it off the island to in town for some reason. I don't know what that reason was. But when I came here they were having it here on the island. It was very well attended by people abroad would come from all across the United States to this and that because of course they wanted to know more about Gullah and what the Gullah was all about, the language, and, you know, the island of course. This island has a lot to do with our culture, our language and all of that too. Another main event is the Penn Heritage Day. I participated in that more so than I have with the Gullah program. I've not been too much involved with- I've participated- I visit, you know. But with the Penn Center Heritage I think it deals with- it goes more in depth with the people as far as teaching them more about our culture, where they come from and that sort of thing. It goes in more detail.

DF: Okay, you said you work with that-

LR: Maybe I need to retract that. Not work but I've attended the activities. They have several programs for every level, every age of people, you know, the seniors they have programs for them. The middle-class and also the children, so, you know, Penn has always been concerned

about educating the people more about the heritage here and especially the Gullah. I guess, something like that.

DF: Yeah, I know that, like you said, moving back to your church where you've had 129 years of service in this community, maybe talk a little bit about what some of those programs or maybe some of those services-

LR: Here?

DF: Yeah, because you gotta diversity of people in your church who have some older sites...

LR: Well, when I came here in '93 our congregation was much larger. And well, over the years a lot of our members have expired. Some have moved to other places to continue their jobs have taken different place. But nevertheless, our church, this church here has always played a major role for this island. It's one of the front four churches on the island that has a rich history for the leadership here and the pastorship. The deacons have a very rich history and of course the buy and large is always known for the impact that it has on the community as far as leadership and in the spirituality realm.

DF: If you had one message or a message you want to send to our youth about the importance of your culture, traditions and community, what message would you want them to know?

LR: Well, you know, with young people today it's very difficult to reach young people because of the fact that they're being exposed to so much. So much it sometimes distract from their cultures, you know, a lot of times they'll get involved, they'll get out. You know, when you start going to, they always say, when you start going to school and you leave home you, you know, you come in contact with other things and other people, other cultures and different things of that nature. But I think that if I were going to- my message today, my thing that I had when I came here in 1993 was, a growing church for a coming lord. My concern for the community is to prepare for a day when there will be no more problems, no more pains and not dealing with the cares of this world but a day where we will always live in harmony, we're not there. I really don't believe that we will reach that point in this life but I believe that if we prepare ourselves for the other world, now, a lot of young people may nor be able to understand that or equate that in their minds. "Well, what is he talking about"?, you know this other world, all I can do is get along today. Well, but you have to, I think it's important to have young people to understand that life is important to them. Today is more important then tomorrow. And how you get along with people in your community people in your surroundings will determine what you're gonna really be or how you're gonna be viewed among the community. And I think that, you know, one of the things that I want to I teach here, my church to our young people that, you know, don't get so caught up in materialistic things. Things are important, commodities are important, money, food, clothing, transportation, all those things have a place in life. But those things are temporary. Having all those things and not able to communicate with your brother or your sister or a community person, it's not going to be very helpful for the community. But when you can make prospect in all these things and still communicate with the community then you become a vital aspect for the community. There are people in our community that are wealthy, well known, has

vast knowledge but, you know, they're not all concerned...

[Clip 2]

...for the community and that's where the church come in to play, where it has no respected person, no set groups, not certain class, no certain religion or doctrines. It's all concerned about the individual and coming together, meeting, getting along and growing together.

DF: That's really good because we have a sense of community we want our children to know that we all have a contribution to the community to make us one. That's very good. I thank you so much, is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

LR: Wow, is that all?

DF: Well, unless you have something you'd like to say.

LR: No, no, no, no.

DF: One thing I guess I'd like to know, not growing up on this island the traditions of church or services of the church versus maybe one that you grew up in on the other side of the island?

LR: Well, see now, in the area where I grew up- well, anywhere you go, church services are basically the same, what makes church different is different people. But our services here are, you know, somewhat similar to the services that we had from, when I was growing up in Allendale is just that, you know, the dialect, the language, you know, the Gullah language, listening to the Geechee sound and the way that they talk, the way that they sing. For an example, you know, one of the person that you talk to, Deacon Murray hearing him, you know, I just love to hear him sing. I love to hear him talk because he has that accent, you know. And I think that to me it's so influencing to people who don't know it or not been around it, or never heard it before, you know. That was one of the things that really I was fascinated with when I came here. Getting adjusted to the Gullah language, you know, it was hard for me to sometimes understand what one of my members are trying to say to me. But over the years-

DF: You're training your ear.

LR: Over the year, yeah, I guess. But, you know, we have many services. Other churches in this community, like i said, it's a real close knit community, pastors work together, churches work together. And that sort of thing, yeah.

DF: Yeah, I can see you just support one another because another group was visiting another church and they mentioned, I guess they had someone there, they had three congregations that came together for the service.

LR: Yeah, right.

DF: That's quite unique 'cause we've never had that in our church. I mean, we have visiting churches come in, but like this is the morning service and everybody kind of did their

announcements and one of the ministers, I guess, spoke at that church and somebody's going to be holding your anniversary at their church or something. Is it?

LR: What is it?

DF: I think it's Stockholm was the church that you were going to be fellowshiping next Sunday?

LR: I'm not sure.

DF: Okay, then maybe I got that mixed up.

LR: Yeah, yeah. Now, this church is one of the largest churches, this church. But there's well, Break and Faith Memorial. But there's smaller churches as well. What the smaller churches do is that they work together. They share service days together, you know, they've gone to a central services, they go every Sunday. But before then they would, you know, the services- Now, up home in Allendale where a smaller congregation would have like every other Sunday, a first and a third Sunday. And then another community church would have services like on a second and fourth Sunday, so now, and there would be family members connected to both churches. And on the first and the third Sunday, for an example, if my wife was a member of another church - I'm just using it as an example - she was a member at the second Sunday church and Iw as a member at the first Sunday church she would go with me on the first Sunday and then on the second Sunday turn I would go with her. And that's how a lot of churches worked, you know, in sharing services, like you mentioned earlier, come together and work together, that sort of way. But now, here we have services every Sunday, so we hardly ever get opportunity to go out and visit a church in their worship services. Of course, we have different other programs that we do go out and, you know, fellowship with other churches in the community.

DF: That's a great idea because that way your wife won't have to leave her church family and you won't have to leave your church family because most of the churches then are centered around family. It's my family church and it's your family church. That's good.

LR: Right. And the thing about it was, when I came here, I had pastored a church that was not an every Sunday church prior to coming here and coming here and pastoring to such a large congregation was a challenge for me, a great challenge for me because I was pastoring a very small congregation of people. But the lord blessed and sent me here and having to adjust to a small to a large congregation, as I said earlier, it has been an experience for me.

DF: And a blessing as well?

LR: Oh, of course a blessing.

DF: Yeah, because you get a chance to meet such wonderful people, the one's that I've met in church. They've been very welcoming. This island has been very welcoming in the sense of love and they made me feel quite at home. So just the few times-

LR: Oh, you know, the people here they get excited. In everything they do in celebrations they get all excited. You can just feel the excitement in the air. They've taken a lot of pride in what they do. They believe in what they do. My brother in law used to tell me, he lived in Burton, across the bridge, and my sister married and his family owned a taxi services, and he would drive taxi, and a lot of times he would have to come over here on the island. And for maybe about twenty years we traveled there to Beaufort and never came across the bridge. I never had no desire to come over here. My sister, they always wanted to go to Huntington's Island, the beach but I never wanted to come, and never had no idea that I would come. But my brother would tell me, he told me when the lord called me here, he said, "Len", he said, "I wanna tell". He said, "You are going to a place where the people are so different". And I didn't understand the (message that he meant) until I came over here and I learned that these are the most loving people that you would want to be around. The most caring for you. They would do just about anything that they can to help you along the way.

DF: I think the first introduction I had you guys had a picnic and they said, "We're going to walk back to this picnic". So they said, "Come on back, come on back". And I said, "What"? and I was trying to introduce myself because I didn't just want to show up. He said, "Oh no, you gotta eat first". So we got in line and it was like there's all this food. I was like, "Oh my god, this is so good", so we sat and ate, then I ate some more. And then people, you know, they warmed up and I felt like I was part of the family reunion. And then we came back the second year, it just seems like that was our space. And unfortunately for me, I say for me, that we came a little earlier this year, so I'm going to miss my picnic.

LR: Oh boy, I like the Frogmore soup that they fix. Did you get some of that last year?

DF: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

LR: Oh boy, it's delicious.

DF: Yeah, they don't make it anywhere else like that.

LR: Nowhere else like they do here. I mean, it's just unbelievable. Other food here is good. Yeah, I mean, it's real rich, it's very good.

DF: Yeah, and the fish was wonderful. The men were cooking for the women and serving the women, and shrimp!

LR: And you know that fish is fresh. It comes form out of the water.

DF: The guy said they caught it themselves.

LR: That's right.

DF: The food is good I have to say.

LR: All of the seafood here is fresh because, like I said, you know, this was a lot the people here livelihood is how they live is on the water, you know, the fish, the seafood is what they basically lived on.

DF: Now, one of the wonderful things that go on when I come here is the fact that, like you said the traditions, and the pride that they take in their community and all the wonderful things that Penn offers, I'm going tonight to a cooking class, so they join a lot of people to keep people engaged, is that year round or is that just during the summer months?

LR: No, no Penn is always doing something year round. They're always developing programs. We just recently got a new library on the Penn...

DF: I'm going over there today.

LR: Oh yeah, it's wonderful. And, you know, Penn has a wonderful staff and always trying to find ways to help the people to be able to go forward in life. The most important thing is to remember their heritage, the culture. The culture is important.

DF: Okay. Well, pastor, anything else you want to say?

LR: Hmmm well, no. I hope that what I've said has been helpful for someone.

DF: I'm sure it is, I'm sure it is. I want to congratulate you on 129 years of service in this community and I wish you many, many more years. And when I come back next year I hope to see you again.