



JOHN MCCANN

Not just a preacher — a pastor

That proposed Manhattan mosque is getting all sorts of negative attention.

But let me keep it real with you: What folks need to be opposing is the pending construction of any other church in America. There's a so-called house of God on every corner, and this country hardly seems any better for it.

That's because a whole lot of men in shiny suits just want to preach, but not pastor.

But along came Donovan Drake, who once upon a time got an invitation to hop on a bus and ride around Durham to see how folks in this city were living. Now, what you have to understand is Drake — maybe you've heard his name associated with Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church — is a preacher. And this bus ride was on a Saturday. And Drake would tell you Saturdays for preachers are for mowing yards and watching football games.

Yet Drake isn't just a preacher. Anybody can whoop and holler. No, Drake's a pastor. He's about the sheep, the people.

So Drake, a white guy, wound up on that bus and met a tall, black man with a gold tooth gleaming in his mouth. The brother's name was Alphonso Williams, whose story about overcoming drug addiction and homelessness gripped Drake, preaching to the preacher, as it were.

Well, it should come as no surprise the Trinity Avenue congregation over the years has been involved in fighting homelessness, raising money for Housing for New Hope and the Durham Rescue Mission, supporting Habitat for Humanity, things like that.

"He has revitalized the church," Trinity Avenue member Beth Scoggins said.

But now what? Drake today preaches his last sermon at Trinity Avenue.

And there's no scandal. Really. A large Presbyterian church in Nashville, Tenn., came calling. Drake said yes.

So no drama. But I'm confused, because why would a pastor leave a church where the folks absolutely adore him and where things are good and he in no way is being pushed out?

Drake said on paper it doesn't even make sense to him. Durham has a lot to offer. But he said he's leaving because the challenge ahead in Tennessee will stretch him — stretch him as a pastor, as a man.

You're not buying that, are you? What, the guy can't be that pure?

Well, Drake acknowledged the allure of the upgrade.

"It warms the ego a bit," Drake said about the larger church.

But the man understands it's not about big congregations. Remember what Jesus did when he attracted big crowds — he walked away from them, Drake explained.

Bigger isn't always a blessing. Drake would tell you as much.

It's a good lesson for all of us, and that's regarding church work or otherwise.

In other words, how come folks never talk about how God blessed them with a job paying less money?

Of course, the Bible says the heart is deceitful. So even though Drake sounds like a really swell guy, I needed to hear from him about the move to Tennessee being God's plan — or Donovan Drake's.

It's a gut feeling, Drake said. Which leaves open the door for him to go to Tennessee and, in the eyes of men, flop. Yet we still wouldn't necessarily be able to say Drake, 47, didn't follow the will of God.

"A lot of people would say Jesus' ministry was a disaster because of the way it ended," Drake said of the Lord's crucifixion.

Reach John McCann at jmccann@heraldsun.com or (919) 419-6601.