

A Future that's Bigger Than the Past, Pt. 1: "Letting Go of the Past"

Theme: The Church must let go of former visions of church success, in order to see a new path to thriving with and alongside our neighbors.

- I. First, the bad news:
 - A. "Church decline" has accelerated
 1. Only 8% of Americans did not identify with religion in 2000. Today, it's 21% and growing.
 2. 36 percent fewer Americans attended church weekly in '20 than '93 (23% weekly today)
 3. Comparing FBC-Asheville weekly attendance trends to national trends (nearly identical)
 4. We are living through an epochal shift in religious engagement
- II. Wait, there's more!
 - A. Americans, in particular, are disillusioned with our country and with one another
 1. 71% say U. S. is "on the wrong track" (NBC News, Oct. 2021)
 2. Only 55% of Americans trust Americans to make political judgments (Gallup, Oct. 2021)
 3. Over 1 million Americans have died of COVID-19 since March 2020
 4. Brueggemann: "Capitalism has not kept its promises" (July 2020)
- III. Now, the good news:
 - A. We live in a growing city, with many newcomers who care about church
 - B. We have removed significant social barriers to belonging, and our leaders are deeply engaged
 - C. We are centrally located in a city whose downtown is developing in our direction
- IV. *A Future That's Bigger than the Past*, by Sam Wells
 - A. Compelling faith perspectives are less compelling today (p. 4):
 1. Death is the problem = eternal life is the solution
 2. Sin and evil is the problem = forgiveness is the solution
 3. *Isolation is the problem = Jesus reveals the heart of God and the paradigm of abundant life*
 - B. Flipping the script on scarcity and abundance (Luke 9:10-17)
 - C. Church as invitation "to enjoy God just as God enjoys us" (p. 6)
 - D. "Not all has been lost in the Fall": we must shape communities that portray God's kingdom
- V. Wells's sevenfold proposal for congregations:
 1. Contrast to fear: become recognizable community of hope
 2. Contrast to exclusion: be shaped by diversity of gifts
 3. Contrast to despair: walk with the dispossessed
 4. Contrast to decline: recognize financial need as invitation to skills of others
 5. Contrast to defensiveness: establish fertile centers of creative/artistic flourishing
 6. Contrast to denial: become learning, repenting community
 7. Contrast to inward focus: individual and corporately seen as blessings to the neighborhood