

An Opportune Time
February 15, 2014
Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

Our Scripture reading this morning is one of the most familiar of all. To help us hear it in a fresh way, I will read it from a contemporary paraphrase – The Message.

There's an opportune time to do things,
a right time for everything on the earth:

A right time for birth and another for death,
A right time to plant and another to reap,
A right time to kill and another to heal,
A right time to destroy and another to construct,

A right time to cry and another to laugh,
A right time to lament and another to cheer,
A right time to make love and another to abstain,
A right time to embrace and another to part,

A right time to search and another to count your losses,
A right time to hold on and another to let go,
A right time to rip out and another to mend,
A right time to shut up and another to speak up,

A right time to love and another to hate,
A right time to wage war and another to make peace.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these wise words.

Let us pray. Life-giving One, help us to be open to seeing today as an opportune time to do things, and the right time to think about our future. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

A month before I graduated from seminary I started my first pastoral position. I was one of the associate pastors in the oldest continually meeting Protestant congregation in Dallas, Texas.¹ My official job title was so long even I had a hard time remembering it. It included elements of congregational redevelopment with an emphasis on reaching new people – especially those who were younger.

For some reason people assumed that since I was thirty years younger than either the Senior Pastor or the other Associate Pastor that I must know a

¹ Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). For more on this congregation see <<http://cccdt.org/>>.

great deal about the future of the church. That assumption was repeated during my second call when I was at least twenty years younger than the other two pastors.

After a while I realized that simply being younger didn't mean that I knew more about the future. While my relative youth perhaps helped me better understand how younger adults viewed the present, it was useless for predicting the future.

Knowing that people would keep assuming I was a subject matter expert and would keep asking me to talk about the future of the church, I decided it was time that I learned enough that I could talk about the topic more intelligently. That decision was the start of a decade of learning.

When it comes to the future of the American Protestant church, I always begin in the recent past. This is why I encouraged you to attend a class this week on the changing landscape of American Christianity between 1960 and 2010.

More than 50 of you came to hear about sociological shifts related to how Americans believe, behave and belong. Whether or not you heard that presentation it is important to know that this time period in American history was marked by "much continuity and some decline."² Overall, "if there is a trend, it is toward less religion."³

Studying the specifics and considering sociological trends in our society outside of religion⁴, I created a list of the top ways the church of the near future will differ from that of the past. These are changes for the American Protestant church as a whole not things specific to our tradition.

Over the years the list has evolved. It has gone through multiple revisions and numerous updates. This morning I want to share it⁵ with you in hopes that it might help us move forward during this transitional season.

In saying we will have more of one thing and less of another I do not necessarily mean the thing we will have less of is unimportant or will soon end. I do however believe that our energy is better invested in that which is growing and will be more prevalent.

² Mark Chaves. *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton University Press, 2011), p.

³ Ibid.

⁴ For more on general trends related to the future America consider Paul Taylor. *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown* (Public Affairs, 2014).

⁵ I published the last major update to this list in 2012. See Greg Smith. "The Future Church (v.2020) – 10 Shifts" <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/23/the-future-church-v-2020-10-shifts/>>

If you want to follow along, you can do so using the insert in the bulletin. As I explain the items on the list, I want you to identify ways that this congregation is well suited for growth in the future. I also invite you to consider ways these shifts might challenge us.

#10 More Collaboration (Less Competition)

Competition is the idea that there are only so many people in the marketplace interested in church and that the role of individual congregations is to market themselves in such a way as to attract as many people as possible from this small and ever shrinking pool. Alternatively, collaboration focuses on the good churches to do together what they cannot do on their own. As we have moved forward in this new way of thinking we have grown from merely collaborating with churches that look like and think like our congregations to an increasing openness to partner with Christian traditions with very different theological perspectives and also with groups affiliated with many of the world's great religions.⁶

#9 More Scalable (Less Fixed Costs)

Very few churches remain the same size year after year. Most congregations are either growing or shrinking. For those that are now much smaller than they once were often the budget costs to maintain the building and grounds require a larger and larger percentage of the annual operating budget. For those that are growing rapidly the cost of building new buildings can be stifling. Relying less on real estate is one key step toward scalability. Another is creating a staffing model that relies primarily if not exclusively on specialized part-time staff with hours adjusted based on need. Hours can be added for existing staff or new staff hired during seasons of growth.⁷

#8 More About Following (Less About Membership)

For most congregations, membership will always have a role to play. We certainly are recognizing this today in receiving new members. Rather than operating from a membership mentality, in the future we will focus on following. Followers follow the Way of Jesus; they don't pay others to do ministry. They are ministers who pray, lead in ministry and mission, think beyond the walls of the church building and welcome and nurture newcomers as they begin a life of followership.⁸

⁶ For more on this topic see Greg Smith. "Future Church – More Collaboration."
<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/13/future-church-more-collaboration/>>

⁷ For more on this topic see Greg Smith. "Future Church – More Scalable."
<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/14/future-church-more-scalable/>>

⁸ For more on this topic see Greg Smith. "Future Church – More About Following."
<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/15/future-church-more-about-following/>>

#7 More About Questions (Less About Answers)

Throughout most of the twentieth century people went to church expecting to be taught the right way and given the right answers. Increasingly we are shifting away from this type of black and white thinking to embrace the kind of faith formation Jesus modeled. Jesus often used parables to get people to think and to raise questions rather than provide answers. We can expect a greater acceptance of “both/and” rather than “either/or” thinking, especially through embracing the many great paradoxes of the Christian faith.⁹ Pastors and teachers will move away from being the sage on the stage toward becoming a guide on the side.¹⁰

#6 More Jesus-Centered (Less Focused on Tradition)

Tradition is the way individual communities of faith have developed specific ways to do ministry together alongside similar norms established over time at the denominational level. Becoming more Jesus-centered is a way we live into a church that is united and uniting. Being Jesus-centered requires us to recognize that Jesus is primary - not tradition, empire, personal preference, or anything else. It also means putting what was at the heart of Jesus’ ministry first, including the Greatest Commandment to love God and love people.¹¹

#5 More Begin by Belonging (Less Begin by Believing)

Most of us grew up in a religious culture that supposed a specific order was normative. People who became a part of Christianity did so by believing certain things. Such beliefs lead to right behaviors and ultimately to choosing to belong to a church. Proper beliefs and behaviors were prerequisites for formal membership in a church. In recent years we have experienced a Copernican revolution. Today more begin by belonging through a relational connection to a community of faith. As they participate they begin to act like – to behave like – those around them. Only after a season of belonging to and behaving more like this new community do people move on to believing.¹²

#4 More Connected (Less Geographically Dependent)

Historically people have come together at a church campus for worship, education, and more. Increasingly these in person gatherings are being

⁹ For more on this topic see Greg Smith. “A “So What” Faith.”

<http://sowhatfaith.com/2015/02/07/a-so-what-faith/>

¹⁰ For more on this topic see Greg Smith. “Future Church – More About Questions.”

<http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/16/more-questions/>

¹¹ For more on this topic see Greg Smith. “Future Church – More Jesus-Centered.”

<http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/17/future-church-more-jesus-centered/>

¹² For more on this topic see Greg Smith. “Future Church – More Begin by Belonging.”

<http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/18/more-begin-by-belonging/>

supplemented by virtual experiences in our connected world. What this looks like will vary considerably based on church size, location, and the ages of those involved. It will, however, mean that people can participate in most or perhaps all worship and education opportunities without leaving home. It also means that some new churches are fully online ventures.¹³

#3 More Innovative (Less Predictable)

This is a move away from a model of risk aversion best known by the so-called seven last words of the church: “we never did it that way before.” It is a move toward a mentality of welcoming new possibilities and giving people permission to fail. Going forward churches recognize the insanity of doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results. To overcome decades of decline new thinking is required. The innovative new ideas must be generated from a wider group of stakeholders.¹⁴

#2 More Egalitarian (Less Hierarchical)

Alternatively we could think of this as “more flat, less bureaucratic.” This shift impacts many areas including the links congregations have to denominations. While such will continue the local congregation will increasingly be primary. Within the local congregation the dichotomy between clergy and laity will be shattered as we realize something we have always believed: the priesthood of all believers. Committees and Boards comprised of members will yield to Teams and Task Forces comprised of involved participants.¹⁵

#1 More About Deeds (Less About Creeds)

Modern people valued empirical pursuits; post-modern people prefer to deal in experiential endeavors. Christianity is becoming less about saying what we believe and more about acting on our beliefs. Followers of the Way of Jesus are becoming more interested in making real God’s realm on earth than in deciding what statements of faith might divide or unite us. We are invited to find places where God is working and join God as co-creators.¹⁶

These ten shifts are not new; they have been happening all around us the last several years. They are also starting to happen here . . . Now it is our opportune time – a right time for everything related to transition. Amen.

¹³ For more on this topic see Greg Smith. “Future Church – More Connected.”
< <http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/19/future-church-more-connected/>>

¹⁴ For more on this topic see Greg Smith. “Future Church – More Innovative.”
<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/20/future-church-more-innovativ/>>

¹⁵ For more on this topic see Greg Smith. “Future Church – More Egalitarian.”
< <http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/21/future-church-more-egalitarian/>>

¹⁶ For more on this topic see Greg Smith. “Future Church – More About Deeds.”
< <http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/04/22/future-church-more-about-deeds/>>