

Mission Table 2015: Case Statement on the Gospel in a Rapidly Changing Society

How can we engage Christ's presence in a rapidly changing world?

Engaging Christ's presence has been core to who we are from our Judeo-Christian roots and the Early Church. Specific to our American Baptist History, we effectively faced rapidly-changing societies after the Civil War, industrialization, the unrest of the 1960s, and the changing role of women. This effectiveness resulted from the transcendence of the Gospel, whose hallmarks are reconciliation, forgiveness, faith in humanity and hope. Taken together, we believe that the church has good news for society. It is the capacity to relate to a diverse and rapidly changing world.

The issue is urgent. Because we love the church, and believe the church can make a difference, we recognize the need to keep the Gospel and the news of salvation out front. Society needs the gospel. Faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus compels us to address social issues because people need to know Christ. As the church, we must embody the Gospel of Christ in a culturally relevant way and be present in the community.

ABC has been a denomination which has historically adapted to the changing society, accepting, incorporating and supporting different cultures and ethnicities. Example involvements include the history of the American Baptist Home Mission Societies, immigration support, the work of International Ministries, partnerships, Educational Ministries, Black Colleges, resettlement, response to natural disasters, the living out of Baptist distinctives, and the associational principle that allow us to come together in mission.

Our challenge is to proclaim the gospel in a rapidly changing society. In order to address this challenge, we need to enter into prayer and discernment, listen to one another and to God. We must live interdependently, be vulnerable and to give over control. Unless we can work together, we will remain stuck.

We need to have relationships with people, but our churches have difficulty with those who are different. A Gospel of Love means we move from a community of sameness, which is a risk because it requires us to overcome our fears. Thus, to make progress on this challenge, our congregations must understand the changing society rather than fear it.

And while we exercise fear, society exercises doubt. Many people are passionate about making the world a better place but they do not see how the church is relevant in meeting that goal.

The challenge is 1) for the churches themselves to be transformed communities of love through repentance and belief in the Good News of God's love (whatever changes occur in the world) and 2) for the churches, as the Body of Christ that is empowered by the divine Spirit, to be agents of transformation in a rapidly changing world.

Our stakeholders include: the people on the margins; our current congregational populations who have not wanted or did not know how to change; young people; youth groups; and immigrant communities.

To engage these constituents we must repent. The church must repent from the disconnection with society. We have to repent of our fear, our comfort, for where we have settled, and for where society has continued to change but we have remained in our sanctuary without any impact.

In summary, then, we need to be willing to experiment. We must engage partnership to seek paths to re-engage in prophetic ways.

Our challenge today is not to replicate that history but to be inspired by the biblical mission and our history as Baptist people to do in new and effective ways what our forebears did so creatively in their own days.