

'Faithsoaring' churches

Vision of congregational development should be covered in prayer, Bullard says

By Michael J. Brooks
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George Bullard, associational mission strategist for the Columbia-Metro Baptist Association in South Carolina, believes churches must move from success to surrender as they determine what God wants their congregations to do.

"We must walk by faith, not by sight, as the Bible commands," he said. "I call churches who do so 'faithsoaring' churches."

Bullard was guest lecturer for the James A. Auchmuty Lecture Series at Samford University on Oct. 9. The event was hosted by Samford's Center for Congregational Resources. Director Michael Wilson explained that the lectureship, established in 2005, has focused on chapel events in the past, but this year's offering focused on a topic and a day-long training seminar based on Bullard's 40 years of study and research.

Bullard, author of "Faithsoaring Churches: A Learning Experience Version," said Leviticus 25 taught Israel to practice the sabbatical every seven years

and the Year of Jubilee after seven sabbatical cycles.

"This is my working theory," he said. "A church grows in strength and maturity for a time and can 'fall off the ledge' in five to seven years when vision grows dim. Many churches seek to institute additional programming to revitalize ministry, but I'm convinced we need to take a sabbatical for prayer and reflection and re-dream our vision. Program must follow vision."



BULLARD

To illustrate the importance of vision, Bullard used the analogy of an SUV.

"Vision needs to be the driver, and relationships need to be the navigator," he said.

"Management and programming should be in the back seat. Sometimes vision needs to take a break and move to the back seat, then management or program-

ming take the wheel and believe this is where they were born to be!"

'People over programs'

Bullard believes it's unhealthy for vision to be asleep in the back seat.

"Proverbs 29:18 can be translated, 'where there is no vision, the people drive around in circles,'" he said.



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"We often think if we can just add programs and shame people into staffing them, we'll be OK. But some of our programs need to be discontinued if there's no purpose or if they're not meeting needs in the community. We should elevate people over programs."

Bullard shared a chart based on his understanding of the life cycle of congregational development. The chart begins with birth and infancy, and moves to adolescence, adulthood and what he called the plateau, or "prime" position.

"After this kind of prime position, the church can enter the mature state, and then the empty nest, old age and death phases," he said.

Bullard explained the empty nest phase as a time of aging for the church, just as people age and send their children out into the world.

"There can be nostalgia, or the 'do you remember when?' questions," he said. "Then there can be disappointment that things aren't what they used to be and finally anger. People can't get their hands on God when they're angry, so often they get their hands on the pastor instead."

Moving forward

Bullard said some churches resist change, seeing it as a bad word, but he insisted the phrase "how things used to be" is worse.

"Sometimes the church's favorite verse is Hebrews 13:8 about Jesus being the 'same yesterday, today and forever,'" he said with a laugh.

"But we must always be going forward and thinking about tomorrow. The only way to do this is to seek a new dream of

how God wants to lead us in the future."

Bullard believes that congregations need not have the majority of members on board for re-dreaming the vision. His research shows that about 21 percent of the congregation can move the institution forward.

'People of passion'

"The pastoral leadership, the people in leadership positions and what I call 'the people of passion' comprise this 21 percent," he said. "They're key to helping the church re-dream and relaunch as needed."

Bullard encourages churches to take a "spiritual strategic journey" as they commit to this process of "re-dreaming" and "relaunching." He said his advice is that church leaders gather in triplets and commit to pray for the church, its

members and its future for 100 days.

"Things happen when people pray," he said. "The relationship aspect is enhanced, of course, especially when homebound members are included in the triplets. And I believe God will lead His people to discover the new challenges they need to follow in order to be obedient."

Bullard also counsels churches who go through the re-dreaming process to "adopt" other congregations and help them do the same.

"[The late] John Bisagno of First Baptist Houston heard our research and committed to help revitalize 100 struggling churches in his city before he retired," Bullard said. "This is proper stewardship of resources since God uses all kinds of churches, large and small, to do His work." ☛

Rockford to host Fire in the Pulpit

For about three months, Jeff Fuller wrestled with something he felt like God was laying on his heart.

"There are a lot of small church pastors and bivocational pastors around here who don't have the time or resources to get away to a big pastors conference somewhere," said Fuller, pastor of Rockford Baptist Church in Central Baptist Association. "But they need that kind of feeding. So I began to mull over that."

That idea grew and eventually led him to organize Fire in the Pulpit, a time of intense study for pastors and ministers set for Jan. 29–Feb. 1, 2019.

The conference will offer six intensive classes — conflict resolution, expository preaching, sermon preparation, pastoral care, time management and balancing family life — and participants will attend one class for all four days.

Class sessions will be held in the evening each day from 5–6:15 with a meal

included for all registered participants.

"This way they get a total of five intensive hours of training in whatever topic they choose," Fuller said. "Each class will be led by an experienced minister with expertise or experience in the field of study."

It will also be a great opportunity for younger pastors to connect with more seasoned pastors for the purpose of mentoring and discipleship, Fuller said. "I want to see that connection take place so that they will have someone to call when they have questions long after the classes are over."

Then nightly at 7:15, everyone is welcome to attend a worship celebration featuring speakers such as Alabama evangelist Don Graham and Daniel Wilson, the new lead church health strategist for the State Board.

Early registration pricing ends Oct. 31. After Jan. 7, a late fee will be added to the registration price. (Grace Thornton)

For more information or to register, email rbccoosa@gmail.com or call Rockford Baptist at 256-377-4900, Monday through Wednesday from 10 a.m.–2 p.m.

To read more from Bullard, visit his blog at columbiametro.org.