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# THE FUTURE OF DENOMINATIONAL RESEARCH: SOUTHERN BAPTIST RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

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Larry L. McSwain

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I can think of few topics which could be more presumptuous than one which seeks to address the future -- an effort to attempt to assess the future of

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denominational research. The variety of people gathered in this place tonight, as well as the variety of our membership, ought to attest to the difficulty of making too many generalizations about denominational research. Moreover, when we compare the approach to research within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and that of several other denominations, there are many approaches and several different styles of research which could be claimed by any one of them. I understand the risk I am taking to attempt to address a topic so complex as this one.

It is presumptuous in the second place for us to attempt to address this topic because none of us can predict the future. As Sachel Page used to say, "The future ain't what it used to be." As researchers, everyone of us is familiar with data that ought to give us some indicator of what the future holds. But it has never been predictable. Consequently, in all of our work we lay hold of the best estimates of what we can anticipate based on the information available to use and we move forward into the future in faith.

As precarious as this topic is, it is an important one. Charles F. Kettering said it best, "My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there."

This address will not be directed at some kind of prediction about the future, but rather will attempt to address those essential aspects of our tasks to which we must lay hold whatever the future may bring. I like what Henry Ward Beecher said on one occasion, "Every tomorrow has two handles. We should live for the future, and yet should find our life in the fidelities of the present; the last is only the method of the first."

In spite of the fact this is a presumptuous topic, it is also a necessary topic. It is necessary because we have an interest in what happens in the SBC and as researchers we are concerned about our own denomination and other denominations. What we learn can be useful to others, an aspect of our roles I shall address a bit later. It is also necessary because we do plan on a certain vision of the future in our work. Everyone of us presumes that the future will have some similarity with which we discover in our research. After all, research has about it a scientific quality which is built on the very logical assumption that the information we discover contains certain laws of replicability. If we can replicate our findings across similar circumstances, we can attest to the facts of truth. The researcher builds his or her life on the assumption that truth has about it an enduring quality. Our task is to uncover those truths which will prove useful in the guiding of our future visions of our respective work assignments.

In speaking to you this evening there are five emphases I would like to make about our tasks for the future.

## **I. Denominational researchers must focus on their unique role in relation to the role of other researchers.**

The denominational researcher is a servant of the ministry of the church. Whenever that servant role is lost, we will find the resources available to do our work reduced or removed. Ours is a form of special calling in Christian ministry. Unfortunately, research is often the last aspect of our denominational work to be funded when there are developing resources and the first to be reduced or eliminated in times of tight budgets. Consequently, there will always be a need to justify our existence in terms of pragmatic usefulness. Denominational research will always have its needs identified by the users of research rather than by the research community, per se.

While we must strive to keep central our own identities and responsibilities, we should not ignore the rightful role of others in the research process. It is important to our work that we maintain awareness of the work of university researchers. The university researcher has a significantly different role from that of the denominational researcher. The university researcher deals with questions of methods, theoretical models for the development of new understandings of truth, and the identification of issues around concerns we may never raise. A good example of this is the recent work of Robert Wuthnow. In a most stimulating work, *The Restructuring of Religion in America*, Wuthnow takes a careful look at the development of trends in American religious life since 1950. In doing so he has amassed an incredible amount of information concerning American society and American church life. One of the most important of his assertions or trends is that there has been a significant reduction in the importance of denomination in American religion. This kind of work, by one who is capable of raising serious questions about the work of the church in American society, is the kind of work we may not do but must study, understand, and utilize in our own individual forms of research.

A second group of researchers with whom I think it is important for denominational researchers to know are seminary researchers. Again, the role of seminary researcher differs from that of a denominational researcher. The seminary researcher ought to live in an ivory tower to some extent. While seminaries are often criticized for not being down to earth and practical enough, it is an important role for the seminary to serve as a explorer of the issues of research in light of theology of the church. Someone must raise the questions of theological integrity, ethical discourse, and methodological adequacy whether directed to university researchers or to the practical denominational researcher. Seminary researchers ought to be those exploring the fundamental issues of concern to the Christian community which denominational researchers may test and prove or disprove.

A third group with whom the denominational researcher should be in relationship is that host of unnamed individual researchers who function without connection to any institutional base. There is an enormous amount of case study material, participant observation research, and a vast knowledge resource being collected by local pastors, D. Min. students, and individuals who have their own research interests. We have not begun to take advantage of the voluminous information available to us in these multiple ways. One of the cautions we must always exercise in our work is that we not assume that the statistically-based, scientifically-organized method of research which we utilize to justify our roles in denominational research be the only form we recognize and utilize. This raises the issue of the importance of qualitative research for what we do. I think one of the most significant research books to be published in the last several years is one such example. R. Stephen Warner's, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelical and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* is a fascinating case study of church growth in one congregation over 25 years. It is a rich and detailed account by a university professor of the impact of Evangelical experience in the life of a mainline Presbyterian congregation. It is rich in terms of detail about the internal dynamics of a congregation as well as the statistical material he collects regarding church growth. In summary, the future of denominational research requires that we clearly identify our roles and our relationships to other researchers in the specific form of research we are attempting to do.

## II. Our future as competent and effective researchers is dependent on our ability to keep up with the technology available to us.

While this is nothing new for any of us, the future will challenge our abilities even more in terms of the technology that will be available to us than has the past. For the first time in history, we will have available the technical capacities to amass nearly total information on a given topic we are studying. Our task will increasingly focus on how we are to manipulate the vast amount of information available to us and that knowledge will be heavily dependent upon our skills in the use of the latest technologies.

An example of this is the Ibycus system we have installed at Southern Seminary this semester. The Ibycus system is a CD-ROM reader which is able to retrieve information stored on a compact disk. We have one compact disk, less than 5 inches in diameter, on which is stored 29,000 Greek manuscripts. Every manuscript in the ancient Greek language known to western civilization is stored on that one disk. It is possible, using the available software on an IBM PC computer, to trace any word, sentence, or phrase from any one or all of

those 29,000 Greek manuscripts. The system is capable of searching the entire corpus of the Greek manuscripts. The system is capable of searching the entire corpus of the Greek language for a single word in less than 30 minutes. It is even faster if one is using only one manuscript such as the Greek New Testament.

What this technology opens up to us is virtually unlimited stored capacities for information. I anticipate we will have in our library, if we can afford it, a CD-ROM with the entire 1990 census of the United States. In the future it will be possible to buy entire theological libraries or entire collections of poll data or any other number of data sources on a series of disks. The challenges of this technology create three major tasks for us as denominational researchers.

First, we must learn the technical skills to use the data resources. It will be a major challenge in the future for us to remain current in terms of utilizing the information available to us. Any denominational agency which does not invest heavily in ongoing training to keep its staff up to date in terms of technical skills will be remiss.

Second, and more important, we will need the expertise to make sense of all of this information. We have always been better collectors of information than we have been interpreters of it. Having the information available will be of little avail unless we can make good sense of its meaning.

Third, we must maintain an ability to convert the meaning of our findings in language that is simple and clear enough for use by non-technically trained individuals. It is my judgment that we will always relate our findings to a constituency that has little training in the skills of contemporary research. Thus, the most effective denominational researchers will continue to be those who are able to communicate to our constituency in simple fashion. That often means the use of visual rather than statistical information.

### **III. The third challenge I foresee for the future is our ability to develop and maintain networks among researchers to avoid duplication of effort and create adequate sharing of what we know.**

This was one of the driving motivations for the formation of this fellowship. Each of us needs to know what the other is doing in the way of research. While we have worked to develop avenues for sharing that information, we have still not accomplished workable means for doing so. Any such network will require a high degree of trust, a forum for the sharing of such information such as this annual meeting or our occasionally published newsletter and persons willing to invest energy in the difficult tasks of collecting, reporting, and assimilating such information.

Not only will we need networks for sharing information, but I am convinced that our research in the future will be increasingly dependent on the development of networks for the collection of data and the design of research projects. An example of this I might offer is a present project under way at Southern Seminary. We received this year a grant in the amount of \$350,000 to conduct an in-depth research project on quality in ministry within the Southern Baptist Convention. Our task is to try to discover those qualities among ministers which cause our people to consider them outstanding servants of the church. In implementing this research project we have established contact with seven State Conventions as well as the Baptist Sunday School Board, and the Education Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. Our research findings will be accomplished in partnership with these multiple groups. This makes the research process more difficult. However, we believe that it will be much more valid in the long run as a consequence of this effort.

**IV. Our fourth challenge of the future is to find ways to include the most difficult research subjects in our efforts.**

Research, as it has been practiced in the past, has been a process which focused on established institutions and middle-class constituencies. Most of what we know about churches, the religious, and how they function is limited in applicability. We know what it takes to make an established, large, urban SBC church grow. But what about that multitude of tiny cell groups that function more like anti-establishment fellowships than institutions? How do we research the small, informal church? What procedures will allow us to study effectively the host of Black churches which grow in urban associations? Do we really know much about ethnic congregations? How do differing ethnic groups function?

These questions cannot be answered by traditional means of research, not because such constituencies consider our methods intrusions on to their culture and insensitive to their concerns. How to develop culturally-sensitive processed or a pluralistic constituency will be a continuing challenge for the future.

**V. If our calling is to have any meaning we must have the kinds of relationships and influence with decision makers that the information we have will find its way into the decisions affecting how we do church research as a denomination.**

The fundamental purpose of the denominational research is to help the denomination do its work more effectively. One of the questions we must repeatedly ask ourselves is, "Are we being heard?" "Is our work known by those who make the decisions?" "Do those who spend the money of the denomination spend it on the basis of well-founded research findings?" If not, the question we must ask ourselves is whether our work really matters.

If our work is not taken seriously by those who lead the denomination, we may find ourselves in a situation similar to that in the Franco-Prussian war. This war is mainly notable for the introduction of the most secret weapon ever. The Mitrailleuse machine gun was the first of its kind and French officers confidently expected it to rout the enemy forces. However, so great was the secrecy surrounding the new weapon that no instructions were issued as to how to work it until the first day of the war in 1870, by which time the men at the front had other things to occupy them. Consequently, the weapon became of no use in the war.

The ministry of Southern Baptists is too important for us to engage in any effort in this last decade of the 20th century without the finest research findings available and with consideration of what we learn from those findings. God grant that we might live the future with growing commitment to conduct the finest research of which we are capable.