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Office of University
Communications

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Pastors, Laity, GWU Faculty and Staff Explore Concept of ‘Turnaround Leadership’



Dr. Bill Wilson, director of the Center for Healthy Churches (CHC), led the first training event hosted by the Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity and CHC.

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—The Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity and The Center for Healthy Churches (CHC) recently held their first training event since announcing their partnership last fall. More than 60 clergy and lay leaders from North and South Carolina attended “Turnaround Leadership: Life in the 2020s” led by Dr. Bill Wilson, CHC director. Joining the guests for the workshop on the Gardner-Webb campus were about 20 members of the GWU faculty and staff.

Gardner-Webb President Dr. William M. Downs welcomed the group. “This partnership between the Center for Healthy Churches and Gardner-Webb is mission central for us,” Downs affirmed. “We want to do everything we can to be a focal point, a venue for conversations about building healthy churches. Together, this team is going to do great things for the community.”

Wilson began by asking three questions: “Why is your church here?” “If you continue down the path you are on now, where will that take you



?” and “If that is not where you want to go, what needs to change?” He gave time for participants to discuss with each other and share with everyone in the room. They answered that churches are here to fulfill God’s mission, connect to the community, reach the lost, embody the grace of Jesus, and be the light in the community and the world.

After hearing their responses, he pointed out the disconnect between how churches define their purpose and the reality. “I’m in a lot of churches, and I ask, ‘How many people have come into your fellowship who were not previously Christians, over the age of 18, and are not transfers from other churches,’” he shared. “In a room of 50 to 60 people, the response might be two or three people in the last decade. Our talk and our walk are different. I don’t know of a church that doesn’t need some element of turnaround.”

Dr. Robert Canoy, dean of the GWU School of Divinity, agreed with Wilson’s assessment. “Every church that I know today is a ‘turnaround’ church,” he observed. “For that reason we have partnered with CHC to promote this theme and to provide the essentials for helping leaders and their churches make the necessary turn. To be sure, there is no ‘one-size-fits-all,’ and Dr. Wilson never suggests that there is. What he describes is what our School of Divinity does when we are at our best—conducting our classes with the singular goal of helping our students become leaders in churches that can experience the necessary turn without destroying them.”

Paula Bruce, pastor of Freedom Alive Church in Greenville, S.C., said the discussion

resonated with her. “Jesus said, if I am lifted up, I will do the drawing,” offered Bruce, a GWU alumna and doctoral student in the School of Divinity. “Are we really lifting Jesus up or are we just coming up with gimmicks and different things in order to get bodies into the church?”



Wilson told the audience that some leaders take a positive outlook on the decline in church attendance. This notion appealed to Garin Hill, pastor of First Baptist Church in Forest City, N.C. “I think it’s an exciting time to be a pastor,” explained Hill, a GWU alum with a Doctor of Ministry. “We live in an American culture where only 17 percent of the people attend church on a regular basis. That means that 83 percent of people may or may not have a connection to the God who/ has a purpose for their lives. It’s more opportunity than we have ever had before.”

[Learn more about the partnership between GWU and CHC.](#)

About Gardner-Webb University

Located in the North Carolina foothills, Gardner-Webb University is a private, Christian, liberal arts university. Gardner-Webb emphasizes a strong student-centered experience and rigorous academics to prepare students to become effective leaders within the global community. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.

About the School of Divinity

The Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity’s primary function is “to equip persons who are committed to Christian ministry to fulfill their calling at the highest level of the practice of ministry.” The School fulfills this mission through academic programs and the Pittman Center for Congregational Enrichment, which sponsors training events for both laity and clergy. In addition, the School hosts Bible study opportunities, endowed lecture series, and an annual Pastors’ School. [Learn more.](#)

About the Center for Healthy Churches

Located in Clemmons, N.C., the Center for Healthy Churches has provided help, hope and healing for congregations and organizations nationwide. Using a diverse network of coaches and consultants, the CHC has established itself as a national thought leader and high-quality source of resources. Since its beginning in 2014, the CHC has increasingly become a go-to resource for congregations, clergy, and organizations in the midst of transition, staffing challenges, conflict and visioning endeavors.