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CAMPUS NEWS

GWU Webb Connections Panel Discusses Trends in Christian Higher Education

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON MAY 19, 2021



Moderated by President Dr. William M. Downs, Panelists Explored Future of Christian Higher Education

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—In the final Webb Connections event for the semester, Gardner-Webb University President Dr. William M. Downs welcomed a panel of guests to discuss, “A Revival in Christian Higher Education: Building A Bigger Tent.” Webb Connections is an informative series hosted by Downs and featuring experts discussing topics of national, regional and local interest.

The panelists included:

- Dr. James Howell, senior pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church, Charlotte, N.C.
- Dr. Tracy Jessup, vice president for Christian Life and Service and senior minister to the University, GWU.
- Dr. William H. Willimon, professor of the practice of Christian ministry, Duke Divinity School, Durham, N.C.

Downs moderated a discussion that focused on the challenges faced by Christian higher education as it strives to meet the needs of a new generation students. He asked questions centered around three main topics: competing for students while staying true to values; reaching across denominational lines; and ushering in a new era of growth.

In response to welcoming different denominations, Willimon observed, “Younger generations are leading us away from denominationalism. It can be a frightening thing, but it can be an invigorating

time when people maybe have an opportunity to recover some of the core of the Christian faith. It's actually about Jesus; it's not about the denomination label."

Howell pointed out that faith-based institutions must face the future with agility. "What's in the tradition that will enable us to adapt and move into the future, not just clinging on to what's old... what's old probably wasn't so good and we need to learn and grow," he asserted.



The final Webb Connections event for the semester focused on Christian higher education and featured, from left, GWU President Dr. William M. Downs, with panelists, Dr. James Howell, senior pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church, Charlotte, N.C.; Dr. William H. Willimon, professor of the practice of Christian ministry, Duke Divinity School, Durham, N.C.; and Tracy Jessup, GWU vice president for Christian Life and Service and senior minister to the University.

An alumnus of Gardner-Webb, Jessup talked about the importance of Christian higher education. "One of the things that was so important to me is that a Christian higher education gave me the opportunity to own my faith," he reflected. "I grew up in a very loving Christian home. I'm the son of a pastor, but I really didn't understand why I believe what I believe until I came to Gardner-Webb and was able to unpack that and to do so in a nurturing, safe environment that allowed for questions and questions that were not off limits. To recognize that we are going to be serious about our inquiry into truth and if we truly believe that God is the source of all truth, then we should not be scared to ask any questions that might arise in the classroom or outside the classroom."

Members of the audience were also given an opportunity to ask questions. A few of the topics they asked about included: the influences of a secular culture; the relationship of prayer and action; and living the faith when Christians can't agree on what Christianity looks like.

Downs summed up the evening with these thoughts: "To have a revival, we'll have to lead with positivity, with energy, and with excitement. Speaking on behalf of the faculty, staff, and students of Gardner-Webb, I can't wait to do our part to lead that revival."

The full discussion is available below.

About the panelists:

- Dr. James Howell has been senior pastor of Myers Park since 2003. He studied chemistry and physics at the University of South Carolina (Columbia) before going to Divinity School at Duke, where he also earned a Ph.D. in Old Testament. He has published 17 books, including “Yours are the Hands of Christ,” “Worshipful,” and “Weak Enough to Lead.” He is involved in leadership within the denomination and city-wide endeavors.
- Dr. Tracy Jessup received his Bachelor of Arts in Music from Gardner-Webb. He earned his Master of Divinity at Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School (Birmingham, Ala.). He completed his Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Jessup also teaches in the Gardner-Webb undergraduate Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy. He enjoys the opportunity to serve the local church through interim pastorates, pulpit supply, and preaching revival services.
- Dr. William H. Willimon has a Bachelor of Arts from Wofford University (Spartanburg, S.C.), Master of Divinity from Yale University (New Haven, Conn.), and Doctor of Sacred Theology from Emory University (Atlanta, Ga.). A bishop in the United Methodist Church, Willimon served as the dean of Duke Chapel and professor of Christian ministry at Duke University for 20 years. He returned to Duke after serving as the bishop of the North Alabama Conference from 2004 to 2012. He is the author of 70 books with more than over a million copies sold. His “Worship as Pastoral Care” was selected as one of the 10 most useful books for pastors in 1979 by the Academy of Parish Clergy. In 2017, he published “Who Lynched Willie Earle? Confronting Racism through Preaching.”

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