Who are We? ABCUSA in the 21st Century

The American Baptist Church stands at the crossroads of a rapidly changing religious landscape in the United States. On one side of the spectrum are religious nones who have grown from 5% of the population in 1980 to over 20% in 2016. On the other pole stand evangelical Protestants whose share of the religious market has been essentially unchanged in the last three decades. In the middle lies mainline Protestants, who have seen their numbers cut in half since the late 1980’s. The American Baptist Church exists at the epicenter of this turbulent religious change. While many churches in the ABCUSA are entirely white in racial composition, and completely conservative in religious theology; others are incredibly ethnically diverse and hear a progressive social gospel from the Sunday pulpit. The ABCUSA risks being ripped apart by the ideological polarization that has taken hold across the United States as fights over issues like gay marriage and female clergy have not abated.

As the ABCUSA enters into this era full of great peril it has a strong desire to take a step back and rigorously and meticulously asses the state of American Baptists in the 21st century. While many researchers and news outlets report numbers regarding the number and sizes of American Baptist congregations, these facts and figures have not been reassessed in decades. Thus, we propose to launch an intensive study of the American Baptist Church that will serve as a reference point for all future denominational activity in regard to growth, service, and mission. This project will result in an accurate and updated census figure regarding the size of the ABCUSA, as well as an assessment of racial and ethnic diversity inside local ABC churches. There will be a special emphasis placed on determining factors that are generating growth at the local church level.

We believe that this project will serve as an invaluable tool for ABCUSA leadership as they try to navigate the rough waters of mainline Christianity. It will provide them a clear picture to help direct ministries and resources for future denominational efforts. In addition, it will be a insightful tool for other mainline denominations who are struggling to deal with many of the same issues felt inside the American Baptist Church. It seems likely that many of the trends that are affecting ABCUSA are also being experienced in a wide variety of mainline churches. These common realities could spur on denominational cooperation and lead to a renaissance among mainline religion in the United States.