

**VINEYARD CENTRAL: A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY OF  
FAITH**

By

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## **Introduction**

Vineyard Central is a community of God's people. It is a church and it is a network of churches, but these descriptors are inadequate in our present social milieu. "Church" has come to mean something so drastically different than what God desires it to be. In America, and most of western culture, church has come to be identified as a vendor of spiritual goods and services. Based on this (often) underlying assumption, Vineyard Central does not play well with its peers. Vineyard Central (VC) is not a vendor, a franchise or franchisee, a marketplace, or a proprietor. This is part of its grief and glory.

The glory, though hidden in clay jars, is God's wonderful working of redemption lived out in the people and their lives of faith. It is manifest in many small ways – a bed to sleep in, a welcoming hug, a spontaneous cookout, a neighborhood party. VC's glory is most full present in one of its many house churches. The grief is even harder to see. It is the slow and arduous process of unlearning. It is the painful, but necessary, reality that the church does not exist for my own personal well-being or comfort. That is not to say that persons are not cared for or nurtured, far from it! But this community of God's people lives for more than the overindulgent American consumer who desires coddling and shelter from life's torrent waves.

This has not been an easy journey, but it is the one to which God has called this body of believers. To fully appreciate this voyage it is necessary to begin with her story, the common narrative. Those who call VC home are heirs to this heritage. As such, my thesis is: Vineyard Central is a community of God's people who are transitioning from an institution-centric, hierarchical, individualistic church life to a networked, shared, relational community of faith.

Three of the key components of this transition are structure, leadership, and community. All three of these expressions of church life have gone (and are continuing to go) through tremendous change at VC. Likewise, all three of these components have been held on to very tightly by the church in Christendom. And all three must change drastically if the Church is to have any redemptive effect on western culture and society. I will address each transition in turn, beginning with structure.

### **Structure: From Centralized to De-centered**

Vineyard Central was birthed out of Cincinnati Vineyard (Springdale) in 1992. Dave Nixon was the founding pastor and the church began meeting a community center in Norwood, Ohio.

People began coming and seemed to enjoy it. By the end of the first year we had about 100 people, enthusiastic and enjoying things. But I felt a lot of internal frustration.... It was obvious to me that we needed to do a better job of enfolding people into “families” (Cutting Edge interview 2001: 4).

In due course, the building they were meeting in was condemned and they were forced to make drastic decisions. They clearly felt the Lord’s leading into meeting in homes and so began the journey that VC is still on. Several house churches were formed and they began exploring church life in smaller settings.

Eventually, VC would come to inhabit, and then purchase, St. Elizabeth’s. This large stone church building was a Roman Catholic parish, the first in Norwood, and was constructed in 1903. The diocese was selling the church building, the parish house, and the convent where several nuns lived. VC would buy the campus from the diocese and begin to meet in the St. Elizabeth’s as a gathered community of house churches. Initially, these “AllGroups” as they are known, were weekly events. But as the Spirit continued to lead the community discerned that they should become more de-centralized.

Kevin Rains, who transitioned into the Senior Pastor role after Dave Nixon (and has continued tweaking his role ever since), wrote an “E-pistle”, a congregational email sent in January 2002. In it he discusses the continued transition of VC from local church to de-centralized network of home churches.

The point [of our vision] is experiencing and sharing an abundant life together. It’s living the adventure of co-working with God to see his kingdom more fully expressed on earth; that means in our neighborhoods, homes, workplace and even ourselves.... We exist to plant, support and link home churches and networks of home churches. ... A home church is a small, God-centered, missional community of seekers and followers of Christ. I want to especially emphasize that word “missional.” These home churches exist to partner with Christ’s mission in the world. Home churches come together primarily to encourage and equip their members through mutual love and the gifts of the Spirit (I Corinthians 12-14) but they are sent from each meeting with the mandate to be salt and light in their everyday lives at work, home and neighborhoods. This means we’re constantly seeking ways to further God’s purposes in the world 7 days a week. The meetings, the coming together weekly, prepares us for that mission (2002: web).

This captures well the driving force behind Vineyard Central. They are unabashedly missional. But this has been a challenging road. The pressure is to conform to a centralized structure. The main impetus for remaining de-centered is to facilitate a greater degree of missional engagement in the world. The community found the assumed demands of running an institution too constricting to authentically carry out its call.

Wilbert Shenk affirms the same in *Write the Vision: the Church Renewed*. “The integrity of the church in the West is under siege because of the extent to which institutionalism has overtaken the church” (1995: 73). The program-oriented church becomes a “veritable supermarket of specialized services to meet the whims and demands of a consumer society” (ibid). A second reason that institutionalism is so damaging is the vastly disproportionate amount of money and resources spent on maintaining and perpetuating the institution rather than caring for others (ibid: 74ff).

Vineyard Central has, by God's grace, intentionally tried to distance itself from this heavy-handed institutionalism that stifles the Spirit and retards (if not out and out kills) mission. It has attempted, and to a large part succeeded, to do this by way of creating a multitude of small gatherings of believers, fully functioning churches, that continue to be connected as a network. This seems an appropriate and sustainable structural form for this community. In our fragmented and disparate society choosing to build a community of faith in small, but connected ways is admirable.

### **Leadership: From Hierarchy to Shared**

Vineyard Central is a case study of a church in a liminoid state (Roxburgh 1997: 49). The functional and hierarchical leadership structure that VC operated under in its first years of existence is giving way to an atmosphere of shared leadership where anyone can contribute to the community. As Roxburgh illuminates, "in the liminoid, prior normative ranks and hierarchies of relationship and status lose their power to determine and shape the group. Egalitarianism and comradeship come to the fore" (ibid: 49-50). This has been the process in which VC finds itself. Many churches continue to prop up the nonfunctioning, or marginally functional at best, hierarchies. VC has embraced this sea-change and welcomed the emerging collaborative leadership process.

Perhaps an example will best illuminate this dynamic shift in leadership within the life of this community. Though VC consists of scattered house churches it owns a large, formerly Catholic, church building named St. Elizabeth's. This beautiful building is used for quarterly regional network gatherings, art shows, and experiential worship offerings. The building was recently condemned by the city for safety reasons. The gutters need relining and are permitting water to seep into the ceiling causing plaster and possible structural damage. Instead of quickly convening the leadership of the church to make a decision as to how to raise funds and make repairs, the larger network was

notified and process has begun to discern, as a community, what God would have VC do with the building. It was not simply assumed that the building would be repaired; perhaps God would lead the community to demolish the building and use the space for something else. Nor was the decision to remain solely the priority of the Pastoral Council. Rather the first of multiple prayer gatherings was held to wait and listen to what God had to say. The community is still in the midst of the decision, the ending is unclear, but what is certain is that the leadership process is open and egalitarian.

The ministry of the laity is essential if the church is to have a credible witness in our world (Bosch 1995: 59). An unbelieving world makes no space for a professionalized clergy. Nor do clergy have much need of an unbelieving world! The “business of running the church” keeps many clergy so preoccupied that concern for the unbeliever is, though espoused in words, denied in action. Further, shared leadership in and by the People of God is necessary if the cultural divide between public and private, secular and sacred, is to be overcome (ibid). As witness in the world, contributing to the welfare of the society, the laity can have a life-giving, servant ministry.

### **Community: From a collection of autonomous individuals to the People of God**

Roxburgh captures well the reality in which most western churches find themselves.

Pastors lead congregations that have little sense of a vocation as a people called to lives larger than themselves. Preaching, reflecting this cultural captivity, calls parishioners to discover a Jesus who is a guarantor of inner personal happiness in a hazardous and dark world (1997: 21).

Vineyard Central has intentionally moved against the flow of this reality. Certainly there has been, and continues to be, resistance. The life into which VC is living is one where the community is not defined as a collection of autonomous, individual units. Rather,

there is a clear desire to become a people of God. This is not easy in a fragmented, individualistic world. The prevailing assumption is that the church is made up of individual Christians, each finding their path of inner spiritual self-actualization using the Jesus as the guiding motif. In this example, the community, if such a word can even be used, functions as a type of medium by which individual Christians find personal spiritual fulfillment.

The unifying vision, or essence, of Vineyard Central is that it would be a collection of small faith communities, and a community itself, that are not defined by a collection of individuals, rather the community as a People of God would define the individual. This is not a semantic distinction. It is a lived reality in the intentionally small, house churches.

Despite what some would like to believe, size does matter (see DiCandilo 2004: web). As house, simple, or organic churches become more recognized by the mainstream church culture there is a noticeable reaction to the size difference. If a church is merely a collection of autonomous individual selves then size truly does not matter. Each one would be progressing in their personal salvation story and merely relying on others for assistance along the way. However, if the church is called to be the People of God, a community first and foremost reshaped by Kingdom realities, then size does intensely matter. As human persons we are designed for intimate, meaningful relationships with one another. These relationships happen best in small gatherings of people. It just makes relational sense that twelve people can know and share life more intimately than 100 or 1,000.

Robert Bellah, in his bestselling treatise *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, makes clear; “human beings and their societies are deeply interrelated, and the actions we take have enormous ramifications for the lives of others” (1996: 284). He uncovers the fear that is held in our society and most assuredly western churches also, that this new vision of a “genuinely integrated societal community”

threatens our “private success” (ibid: 286). This fear permeates the church as well. If we were to truly think of ourselves as the People of God our sense of individual identity seems threatened. We, church and society alike, wonder if we were to embrace a reconstituted social ecology then we would find ourselves “collapsing into dependence and tyranny” (ibid). This is a real fear and one with which Vineyard Central continues to struggle as this community continues to live into the Kingdom reality of a People of God.

### **Conclusions**

Vineyard Central is still a young church. Not only is it only in its twelfth year of existence, it is primarily populated by young adults. As a fellowship of believers, struggling to hash out its identity and destiny, it seems that it is somewhere in the midst of its adolescence. It is unclear how long or how pervasive this adolescence is for the community. Certainly, it is not a negative experience, though undoubtedly it feels that way at times. Rather, it is a maturing and stretching time. But even as teenagers already possess the beginnings of their future vocation, VC is living into the kind of missional, covenant community that God is forming. There is a clear feeling about the place that this People are on the way. It is not the way of success and media notoriety. It is the way of the cross. It is the laying down of one’s life, even a church’s, for the sake of God’s mission in the world. What does God have in store for this community? It is uncertain, but it will likely be small and countercultural.

Many churches in the West are struggling with cultural discontinuity and marginalization. Some are aware of a missional alternative to the status quo, civil religion of our society. But few have the courage that VC has exhibited. It has been, and seems to continue to, lay it all down for the King and his Kingdom. They are not a perfect church, no church is. But they are a willing church, and God likes that, he likes it very much.

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