

THE VINE PROJECT

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As we've talked and thought constantly about these issues over the past six years (after the publication of *THE TRELLIS AND THE VINE*), we've become convinced of the need to answer the question that a Baptist pastor from Chicago asked on behalf of nearly every evangelical church in the Western world: How can we shift the whole culture of our church in the direction of disciple-making? That's the question that The Vine Project is aiming to answer. It may seem counterintuitive to say so, but one of the reasons we're so keen to answer this question is that we know only too well of the enormous pressure that many pastors and church members are under. For many readers of this book, whether you are a keen lay leader or in full-time pastoral ministry, each week is a fresh struggle just to keep your head above water.

We long for Great-Commission style 'vine work' to be the normal agenda and priority within our churches. We yearn for every member of our congregation to grasp this and to live it— to pray for and reach out to those around them to make new disciples, and to nurture and edify and encourage one another to maturity in Christ.

We have constantly spoken with pastors and lay leaders who are grappling with energy-sapping, emotionally exhausting situations—everything from illness, grief and heartache in their own families to relational conflict, mental health issues and sexual abuse in the church family. We find ourselves waiting for that crisis-free 'normal' year where we can actually do some planning and make progress, but it never quite arrives.

It's the big question that we're seeking to answer: how to shift your church culture towards disciple-making, and the task is made less easy by the obvious fact that each church needs its own answer. Each church is at a different point on the spectrum, has different strengths and weaknesses, faces different obstacles, and, crucially, has different people whom God has blessed it with.

We've called this book a 'project'. It's not a set of detailed answers or prescriptions delivered from on high to solve your problems. It's a set of processes, tools and guidelines for you to work through with a small team of like-minded fellow workers— starting from wherever you happen to be, with whatever strengths and weaknesses you happen to have.

This means that *The Vine Project* is not a book just to read, like all those other ministry books that you buy at conferences and read and feel mildly enthused by for a time, but which

ultimately go to their home on the shelf with all the others. It's a project. It outlines a process to work through and talk over. It's a book that should lead to a plan and to actions taking place over time.

Unless you gather a small group of godly, committed people to read this book with you, and to work through the process with you, then we're pretty sure it will do you and your church little good.

To make this process easier—of gathering a team and working through each phase of *The Vine Project* together over time—we're providing you with support. At thevineproject.com you'll find not only a growing library of videos, stories, articles and case studies, but also a community of other ministry teams who are all working on 'Vine Projects' in their own context. It's a place to ask questions, to learn from the experiences and insights of others, and to contribute your own.

We have designed *The Vine Project* to be as flexible and applicable as possible to a multitude of different ministry contexts, but there will doubtless be topics you want to cover that are absent, as well as things we've covered that don't apply to you or that you'd want to handle differently. This first read through will no doubt generate a little list of these customizations that you'd like to make.

A key aspect of *The Vine Project* is assembling a small team of fellow workers to work through the process together; to be the team of change agents who plan and initiate and exemplify and champion the change in culture that you're wanting to achieve. Who should be on this team? No more than ten people, and no fewer than four.

Once you've gathered a team, one of your first tasks will be to draft a rough plan together as to how you are going to work through the five phases of *The Vine Project*.

All Christian ministry, including the project on which we're about to embark, should take its cue from Paul's summary of his ministry in Colossians 1:28-29: "*Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*" We need to keep praying for Christ's energy to work powerfully within us, for his Spirit to guide us as we think and plan, and for God to give the growth as we devise new ways of planting and watering.

The culture of a church—or any organization, come to that—is a heavy and powerful drag against any attempt for meaningful change.

As we've talked with many pastors over the past six years about their attempts to put a '*Trellis and Vine*' or disciple-making ministry philosophy into practice in their churches, it has become apparent to us that 'culture' is a significant and under-addressed issue. What we have seen

most often is pastors seeking to bolt a few new programs or initiatives onto the existing culture—things like: preaching a sermon series on ‘disciple-making’ starting some one-to-one Bible reading with people, or giving out copies of David Helm’s book *One-to-One Bible Reading: A Simple Guide for Every Christian* adding ‘disciple-making’ to the goals for the year trying harder with welcoming newcomers running a training course on how to share your faith with outsiders. What usually happens is that after six or twelve months of trying to inject one or more of these new elements into church life, the enthusiasm starts to wane, and the weight and momentum of the existing culture squashes any progress that has been made. It’s like trying to turn around an ocean liner with a few strokes of an oar. The pastor is left muttering, “This ‘trellis and vine’ business might work well somewhere else, but it’s not working here. Maybe it’s time I tried something else.” And so the cycle continues. A new model or idea will come along next year.

To stretch a familiar metaphor to the limits of its usefulness, we might say that the prevailing culture of a church is made up of both ‘vine’ and ‘trellis’ elements—that is, both the conviction-based activity of every Christian speaking the word of God to others at every level by the power of the Spirit (vine), and all the structures, programs and committees of your congregational life (trellis). What we’re saying about ‘culture’ is that there’s little point teaching some new convictions or initiating some new kinds of vine work unless you’re also prepared to reform and optimize the trellis that supports it and gives it structure and shape. Both must be done as part of a total package.

Ministry trellises are not the bad guys of church life. The point we were making in *The Trellis and the Vine* is that it is very possible, and in fact very common, to have a multitude of programs and activities and administrative structures—that is, a large, well-maintained and impressive trellis—without very much actual vine work going on at all— that is, without many people actually speaking and proclaiming the message of the Bible at every level in church life and in the world.

The Big Question this book is seeking to answer is: **How do you shift the culture of a church in the direction of disciple-making?** Come to that, how do you work on the culture of a church to change it any direction? The answer is that you can’t. You can’t change the culture by working on the culture, because culture is a description of what you have become. It’s a way of summarizing the whole way you do things, the multifaceted web of tacit beliefs and practices, formal and informal, that make up who you are and how you roll. You can’t work on ‘culture’, as such. It’s the product of years and decades of idea-driven practices and practically expressed ideas.

What you can work on and change are the elements that produce culture: (1) the deeply held beliefs and convictions that drive and underpin your culture (not all of them always openly

expressed), (2) the activities, practices and structures that express and embed those beliefs at every level of church life.

You can work to bring change to the way people think, and to how those convictions are practised in behaviour and structures and habits—and over time you will look back and say that you have generated a new ‘culture’.

How much time, effort, thought, energy and sweat, how many tears, setbacks, successes, failures, joys and sorrows do you think will be required to bring about this kind of wide-ranging, deep-rooted change to any organization—let alone a long-standing church culture?

It won’t be a quick process—that’s why this book is part of a project to work through over years rather than another ministry book to read and put back in its place on your shelf with all the others.

It will require more time and effort and gifts than any one person has —that’s why this is a project to embark on with a team of godly, committed, gospel-hearted fellow workers who can encourage each other and keep each other going.

And of course it’s a work that none of us are remotely competent to do —that’s why we depend on God. Like the apostle Paul, we gratefully say:

Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor 3:5-6)

Most pastors lean in one direction or the other: there are those who love to read theologians and Bible scholars, and there are those who prefer reading practical Christian leadership books. If you’re a ‘Bible guy’ you’ll probably want to start to change your culture with the theological and biblical convictions that you want your people to hold, and chances are you may never get beyond there. If you’re a ‘leadership guy’ you’ll probably be impatient to square away the theological stuff quickly in order to get into the nitty-gritty of strategic analysis and planning. In the process we’re about to outline, it’s emphatically both/and. The theologically driven convictions and beliefs are vital and foundational— we need to take the time to dig into them, to sharpen them, and to live and breathe them. But the practices, programs, activities and structures that express and embody and facilitate the living out of our convictions are just as vital. This means long-term work is needed at this point. Let us encourage you not to give up in the midst of it—because you will be tempted to.

The process we're about to put forward is hardly revolutionary or controversial. It's a pretty standard procedure that any organization might undertake in bringing about significant organizational or cultural change. It has five phases:

Phase 1: Sharpen your convictions—dig into the Bible and its theology to clarify what you believe about disciple-making and ministry.

Phase 2: Reform your personal culture—make sure that your convictions have penetrated the culture of your own life; that you are demonstrating your convictions by how you live and minister to others.

Phase 3: Loving, honest evaluation—undertake a clear-eyed thoughtful examination of everything that happens in your church to see how well (or poorly) it accords with your convictions: in what areas does your culture best reflect your convictions, where is it weakest, and where is the greatest potential for growth and change?

Phase 4: Innovate and implement—work out what you want to stop doing, start doing, and keep doing; plan new pathways for disciple-making and work out how to implement these over time.

Phase 5: Maintain momentum—monitor and review how the project is unfolding; look at obstacles and work out how to overcome them; build momentum and keep it rolling.

Discussion:

1. If you had to summarize your church culture in a two- or three- word slogan, what would it be?
2. See if you can identify the key habits and activities and traditions that express and reinforce the culture of your church.
3. Which of the five phases of the process we're about to embark on do you think you will find most difficult? Why?
4. What are you looking forward to in working through the process we've outlined?

We've been suggesting that bringing effective, long-lasting change to the culture of your church will involve both the convictions (or theology) that you hold and prayerfully teach, and the structures, habits, practices, programs and relationships that express and support those convictions. Both aspects are important, and of course are linked. Convictions will lead to certain practices; practices will be based on and express certain convictions. And together, convictions and practices generate a culture— a 'way we do things around here'.

The two main problems nearly every church culture faces are:

1. Lack of shared clarity on core convictions (i.e. we don't all have a clear shared understanding of who we are and what we're trying to do together under God).
2. Lack of alignment between convictions and practice (i.e. a bunch of miscellaneous things happen around the church that no longer reflect our convictions, if they ever did; or, worse, that reflect and reinforce different convictions that are alien to us).

Here are five key questions related to 'discipleship' and 'disciple-making':

1. Why make disciples?
2. What is a disciple?
3. How are disciples made?
4. Who makes disciples?
5. Where to make disciples

By answering each of these questions, biblically and theologically, you should be able to construct a coherent vision of what disciple-making is, and what it means for your church.

(The next section of the book, an extremely large section, is in my opinion an excellent biblical study of the above five key questions. It includes many diagrams and discussion questions. Below is a greatly abbreviated summary of this in-depth section of *The Vine Project*.) HG

Conviction 1: Why make disciples?

The reason we want to make more and more disciples of Jesus Christ is this: because God's goal for the whole world and the whole of human history is to glorify his beloved Son in the midst of the people he has rescued and transformed. God is now putting this plan into effect, by rescuing people out of "this present darkness" into the kingdom of his Son by his death and resurrection—people who are being transformed to be like Jesus, and who now have a sure and certain place around Christ's throne in a new creation where evil and death are no more.

Conviction 2: What is a disciple?

We then clarified exactly what a disciple is: a forgiven sinner who is learning Christ in repentance and faith. We saw in the Gospels that a 'learner' (or 'disciple') of Christ is someone who has recognized the dark and lost state they were living in under God's judgement, and who has turned to Christ in repentance and faith as Master, Saviour and Teacher to commit themselves totally to obeying him, to learning to keep all his commandments, and to living out that repentance and faith daily for the rest of their lives. This kind of 'transformational learning' is really another way of describing the totality of the Christian life. We saw how this same framework of thinking carries into the rest of the New Testament, where 'learning Christ'

means hearing the word of the gospel (of Christ's saving rule), responding to that word in faith, and thereby passing from death to life in Christ—with a resulting urgency to kill off the sinful worldly behaviour that remains from their former life, and to put on instead the new clothes of Christ. To become a 'Christ-learner', then, is both a decisive and gigantic step of repentance in accepting the salvation that God has won for us through Christ (symbolized by baptism), and an ongoing daily commitment to living out the implications and consequences of this massive salvation that God has won for us (symbolized by the yoke).

Conviction 3: How are disciples made?

How does this rescue and redemption happen? The making of disciples is God's work, achieved as his word and Spirit work through the activity of Christian disciples and in the hearts of those they speak to. We summarized that activity as the persevering proclamation of the word of God by the people of God in prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God, otherwise known as "the four Ps":

1. Proclamation of the word in multiple ways

2. Prayerful dependence on the Spirit

3. People are God's fellow workers

4. Perseverance, step by step

We suggested that the goal of every form of Christian ministry could therefore be summarized simply as seeking to help each person, wherever they happen to be, to take 'one step to right' through these four Ps—that is, to hear the gospel and be transferred out of the domain of darkness into the kingdom, and then to press forward towards maturity in Christ in every aspect of life, by the constant, persevering, prayerful proclamation of God's word by people in multiple ways.

Conviction 4: Who makes disciples?

In this conviction, we dug deeper into the idea that it is the joy and privilege of all God's people to be involved in the four Ps. We looked at the biblical teaching of how God by his Spirit opens the mouths of all disciples to speak the one word of Christ, in a richly varied way. We concluded that speaking the word of God to others for their salvation and encouragement is an expected and necessary component of the normal Christian life. And correspondingly, a healthy church culture is one in which a wide variety of word ministries are exercised by a constantly growing proportion of the membership. We then looked at various practical examples of what this might look like, and at some of the questions, barriers and inhibitions that arise. We concluded by suggesting that expository preaching is vitally connected to this kind of 'every member word

ministry’. An expository pulpit is the foundational word ministry that feeds and regulates and equips and builds an ‘expository church’, in which the word of the Bible is being ministered at multiple levels in a rich variety of ways by the congregation. In other words, we could answer the question ‘Who makes disciples?’ as follows: By their preaching, training and example, pastors equip every Christian to be a Christ-learner who helps others to learn Christ.

Conviction 5: Where to make disciples

Our final conviction clarified that making and growing ‘Christ-learners’ is not just something that happens with new Christians, or in small groups, or in one-to-one counselling. It is the basic activity that should be at the centre of everything we do as a church—that is, as a transformational learning community—including and especially our Sunday gatherings. One way of describing Sunday church is as a ‘theatre for disciple-making’, in which we seek to help everyone present take a ‘step to the right’ through the prayerful proclamation and speaking of the word of God.

We also clarified that the missional or evangelistic side of making Christ-learners is not something that only happens overseas in traditional ‘mission work’. The where of making more learners of Christ is all around us—in our families and streets and communities, in every corner of this present darkness in which people are so desperately in need of the saving gospel of Christ.

Where, then, does learning Christ take place? It happens in every facet and activity of the transformative learning communities we call churches; and through our churches, it also happens in every corner of this present darkness.

Phase 2 of the Vine Project is REFORM YOUR PERSONAL CULTURE

We want to urge you to spend some time on a part of the process that many people leave out, and which you also (we suspect) will be tempted to skip. We want you to take some time to reform your own personal culture. Is ‘the whole way you do things’ influenced and shaped by the convictions we’ve been clarifying? Does your own personal culture reflect the convictions that you have just clarified and endorsed?

‘Learning Christ’ is more like learning to play golf than learning times tables. It is the kind of knowledge that must be lived and practiced, or else it has not really been learned at all. This is one of the reasons Paul insists to Titus that any elders he appoints must be people not only of good doctrine, but good character and lifestyle—because if an elder is not like this, he has not grasped the meaning and significance of the “trustworthy word” that has been entrusted to

him. He would be like a golf pro who had read countless instruction books and watched endless YouTube videos, who looked the part and could talk the lingo, but who was actually lousy at golf. Until he plays, and plays well, it is nonsense to say that he has 'learned golf', let alone that he is competent to teach anyone else.

Christian 'learnership' is the full package. It is a transformed mind and heart being worked out and lived out daily in every sphere of life. Teaching this package means not only causing people to learn gospel ideas and knowledge and truth, but also causing them to learn a way of life. This necessarily involves modelling and imitation. This is a constant theme in Paul's writings. He wants Christians to learn his ways and imitate his life:

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practise these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4:9)

Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Cor 10:32-11:1)

Paul wants his ministry protégés Timothy and Titus likewise to learn from him, and in turn to be examples to their people.

You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. (2 Tim 3:10-11) (See also 1 Tim. 4:12 and Titus 2:7-8.)

And he wants the chain of example and imitation to continue, as those who follow the godly model of life that Paul has taught them, in turn serve as examples for others.

This connects with what we saw in Phase 1 (Conviction 3) about how learners learn. It happens through God's word, prayerfully spoken over time in dependence on the Spirit—through and to God's distinctive people, his saints. The ones who do the prayerful speaking are those whose lives have been set apart by God to be different (i.e. all Christian saints). And those distinctive lives are part of the teaching package. Our lives demonstrate to other learners what 'keeping the commandments of Jesus' looks like. This of course makes most of us feel uncomfortable and inadequate. We are painfully aware of our sins and failures, and how far short we fall in keeping Jesus' commandments. We feel that our lives are a constant cycle of failure and forgiveness; of striving for holiness and repenting when we fail to reach it. How can we ever be good enough to function as a model for others? And yet this is precisely the example we are to set to those around us—not of someone who keeps all the commandments of Jesus, for no-one does this or ever will do this (not this side of glory). The example we give is of someone

who is learning to keep all the commandments of Jesus, who is seeking to grow and make progress and be transformed and bring forth the fruit of the Spirit. In other words, the example we set is someone who by God's word and Spirit is moving to the right one step at a time—not someone who has already arrived at the heavenly fulfilment of Christian maturity.

This is critical to the whole process of culture change. If we want to see real change in the culture of our church, we need to start with seeing real change in the culture of our own Christian lives— not only in the way we think and the convictions we hold, but also in how those convictions are expressed and embodied in everything we do: in the structure and norms of our life, in our habits and speech and behaviour and relationships and activities and priorities, in all the bits and pieces that go together to make up 'the way we do things'.

The culture of a church will not change unless a critical mass of 'Christ-learners' has caught the vision of moving themselves and others to the right, one step at a time. If you are one of a small group of change agents who want to initiate and lead that process of change (i.e. if you are the kind of person this book is aimed at), then now is the time for some sober self-examination. You cannot initiate and lead a culture- change process if your own personal culture is not up for change as well.

This is because the change you are proposing and leading is not a change of program or structure or model. It is fundamentally a transformation of lives by God through his word and Spirit. Our purpose is not to bring a new idea or a new angle or a new organizational technique to our churches; we are bringing the word of God, along with its call to repent and lead a new life in Christ.

To put it another way, what you are doing together as a Vine Project Team (in the whole process we are engaged in) is really a prototype of the culture transformation that you eventually want to see take place throughout your congregation. You yourselves (as a team) need to be a 'transformational learning community'.

All this is just as true, of course, for those of you who are involved in planting a new church (as opposed to renovating an existing one). There is almost nothing more valuable for a new church-planting team than to 'own' and personally live out the culture that you want to be the basis of your new fellowship. The point is clear enough, and perhaps does not need to be labored further. But what does it look like in practice? How can we be living, breathing advertisements for the convictions that we want our whole church or fellowship to embrace? (The author warns here of approaching this in a legalistic fashion.)

The author next treats how mature Christian believers should approach their own growth in Christ. Our convictions tell us that the normal Christian life is transformative learning in Christ—a learning in which all of us seek to move ourselves and everyone around us to the right

through the prayerful, patient, Spirit-imbued speaking of the word of God. If we are to live out this conviction and set an example in doing so, the way forward is simple to express, if not always easy to do.

If there is one practical suggestion we would make in moving to the right in our own personal learning of Christ it would be this: for every hour you spend hearing and reading God's word, spend an hour prayerfully marking, learning and inwardly digesting it.

We need to think about the different spheres and contexts of our lives, and ask ourselves two questions: (1) Whom do we want to move one step to the right? And (2) How are we going to do that? Four major contexts

As a simple way of thinking about the totality of our personal lives, let's look at four common spheres of relationship most of us find ourselves in:

Our households: How are we seeking to move our spouse, or children, or family members to the right through the word and prayer? Have we even thought of our families in this way—as those who, like us, need to learn Christ? What could you do to insert regular Bible reading, discussion and prayer into the rhythm of your household life? Thinking about it another way: what does each individual person in your household need in order to take a 'step to the right'?

The world: Think about your workplace, the school your kids go to, your neighbours, your friends and acquaintances—who in that sphere of life do you have regular contact and relationship with? Where are these people up to in their journey to the right? What could you do to move them a step or two further along, through the word and prayer?

Small group ministries: Many of us are involved in small groups of different kinds—Bible study groups or home groups, or ministries to particular groups of people (like youth ministries, or children's ministries). Think about your involvement in these groups. How are you going with moving people to the right in these contexts? What could you do to make some progress? For example, is there someone you could meet with to read the Bible one-to-one for a period of time?

Church on Sunday: What could you do to treat Sunday more as a theatre for 'learning Christ'—whether in your attitude, your conversation with people before and after, your welcome of newcomers, and so on?

In most of these contexts or spheres of action, you don't have to operate as a lone wolf. In thinking and talking this through as a Vine Project Team, you may come up with some ideas and suggested actions that you can do together. For example, you could decide to: do some training together in evangelism, and then go door knocking or street evangelizing together run a gospel

course together to which you could invite your friends work together on welcoming newcomers at church, and following them up in the weeks after their visit.

This section of the book is full of practical suggestions for outreach, for example: (1) Think of three unbelieving friends you'd like to pray for and try to engage with about Christ. What is an achievable next step for each one of them? (2) Think and pray towards reading the Bible personally with someone who wants to know Christ.

Phase 3 of The Vine Project is LOVING, HONEST EVALUATION

We need sense of godly dissatisfaction is a good place to start as we come to a vital stage in the Vine Project—the phase where, as we Australians like to put it, we go into the room of mirrors and take a good hard look at ourselves.

Most church cultures share with other human organizations a high level of discomfort with any sort of honest open questioning of the way things are. This is a touch ironic, because of all people Christians ought to be the ones who embrace honest constructive re-evaluation. After all, Christians believe in the inevitable effects of sin and imperfection in all activities and groups (including churches); we believe in the possibility and desirability of growth and change by the power of God; and we believe that honesty and truthfulness are godly virtues. (Many Bible verses are given here on the need for kind of evaluation.) The authors then propose that the leadership group prayerfully make a commitment together that they will proceed in a spirit of mutual trust, love and honesty.

The goal is to have a clear and realistic picture of your activities, structures, events and programs:

- 1.** Which ones are working well (i.e. are well aligned with your convictions), and should be championed and built upon?
- 2.** Which ones have real potential, with some work?
- 3.** Which ones do not currently embody your convictions and don't seem to have much potential for change?
- 4.** Where are the gaps: those areas where you're not doing much, and where new programs or structures or activities might be needed?

The goal of this phase is discovery, understanding and clarity. It's not to generate new ideas or solutions (that's our next job, in Phase 4). It's very easy in the midst of evaluation to jump straight to what we should do about it. Try to resist this temptation! You might find it useful to have an ideas file or 'parking lot' for suggestions and new ideas that arise during the evaluation

phase—somewhere to note down the idea or suggested solution, so that you can come back to it in Phase 4.

The following seven evaluation exercises include numerous questions to look at, etc.

Evaluation Exercise 1: Getting your hearts ready for evaluation

Evaluation Exercise 2: Where are your people up to in learning Christ?

Evaluation Exercise 3: How effective are your regular programs and activities in moving people to the right?

Evaluation Exercise 4: How effective are your Sunday gatherings in moving Christ-learners to the right?

Evaluation Exercise 5: What happened with your newcomers?

Evaluation Exercise 6: The numbers

Evaluation Exercise 7: Roadblocks

Summary and conclusion - Think back over the various evaluation exercises you have done.

1. How would you characterize or summarize your church culture? See if you can come up with just one or two words that best capture the kind of church you are. It doesn't have to start with 'C' but here are some examples that do:

Confused church (we don't fight with each other, but we have no clear sense of who we are and what we're trying to do)

Conflicted church (there are competing ministry philosophies vying for prominence)

Comfortable church (we know who we are, we like it that way, and we're happy to tick along)

Cluttered church (lots of committed people doing lots of things, but not actually seeing many people converted or growing)

Cynical church (we're a bit jaded and sick of new programs and fads)

Consumer church (our culture is built around providing an enjoyable spiritual experience for those who come)

Caring church (there's a warm personal sense of care for one another, but not much 'moving to the right')

2. Look back over your evaluations and see if you can come up with your top three for each of the following:

- a. Which three areas or ministries within your church have the most potential (i.e. by investing in them, you would be most likely to bring change to the whole church culture)?
- b. If you had to scale down or close down three activities, ministries or programs, which would they be?
- c. What are the top three obstacles or potential roadblocks that are likely to stand in your way?
- d. What are the top three things you'd like to improve about your Sunday gatherings?

Phase 4 of the Vine Project is INNOVATE AND IMPLEMENT

We hope and trust that the vital groundwork you've done in the first three phases will now bear fruit in some concrete plans for change. So far, we have: clarified the core convictions that we want to see drive our whole church culture (Phase 1) sought to live and breathe those convictions in the 'personal culture' of our own lives (Phase 2) evaluated our current ministry culture, and sought to understand exactly where it does or does not align with our convictions (Phase 3).

Now we come to what we don't mind admitting is the most difficult and challenging phase of the process. We also strongly suspect that this will be the toughest phase to work through for you as a Vine Project Team, for at least four reasons.

Firstly, this is the phase where you're inevitably going to upset some people, because this is the phase where you start actually changing things. **Secondly**, this phase will be difficult because churches are complex. **Thirdly**, this phase will be complicated because your context and situation will significantly shape your plans. The **fourth** reason this phase will be tough is because execution is always hard. A significant body of management literature has built up around this very common phenomenon in strategic planning. Most organizations (whether businesses or schools or churches) find it quite possible to put together a sensible and coherent strategic plan for making progress on their goals. But actually following through over time and putting the plan into effect? That's much harder. It's why so many strategic planning documents sit gathering dust in bottom drawers all over the world.

If you're going to see significant culture change over time in your church or ministry, you will need to generate and implement significant plans in at least four key areas:

1. Your main gathering (in most churches this will be the Sunday church gathering)—so that it better functions as a ‘flagship’ for the culture you want to create.
2. The rest of your church life (all your programs, ministries, groups and activities, including the home life of each member)—so that they provide clear and effective pathways for ‘moving people to the right’.
3. Your long-term plans for growth—so that you’re anticipating and preparing for the growth that (God-willing) your plans will produce.
4. Your communication and common language—so that a new way of thinking and talking about disciple-making and ministry becomes normal in your fellowship.

In each of the four areas, we will put forward a range of ideas and suggestions that show how your convictions (from Phase 1) can be expressed and embodied and reinforced to create a new church culture. In each case, the process will then be for you to think about your current circumstances (from the evaluation in Phase 3), and draw up a simple strategic plan for bringing change to each area, including: a small set of clearly articulated strategies or priorities some simple, measurable, realistic goals for those priorities a set of actions to start heading towards those goals (including who’s going to do them, by when, with what resources/cost).

Focus Area 1: Make Sunday a flagship

If we are going to bring change to ‘the whole way we do things around here’, then we need to think about our main weekly gathering—for two obvious reasons. **The first** is that our main church services or meetings are prime occasions for learning Christ. **The second reason** we have to think carefully about Sunday is that it sets the tone and direction for everything we do as a church community. Sunday is the rallying point, the flagship, the heartland—or whatever other metaphor you’d like to use to describe that regular event which constitutes and defines and glues together a community of people.

The plan for this first focus area is to look at each broad stage of people moving to the right as a Christ-learner (Engage, Evangelize, Establish, Equip), and to think about how Sundays could facilitate this movement and model the whole process to the congregation. We’ll look at: **1.** Engaging unbelievers on Sunday **2.** Evangelizing on Sunday **3.** Establishing on Sunday **4.** Equipping on Sunday **5.** Equipping for Sunday **6.** Stories about Sunday

1. Engaging unbelievers on Sunday: What’s it like for a complete outsider to come to your Sunday gatherings? We’re talking about a non-Christian person who has been invited by one of your members, or who has just wandered in—someone on the far left-hand side of our ‘move to the right’ spectrum, who knows very little about Christ or church or Christianity. Does your

Sunday service engage them? Is it comprehensible and accessible to them? Do they feel welcomed and appreciated?

- a. What do you think is the attitude of your members towards inviting a non-Christian friend or family member along to church?
- b. What elements of your current church meeting would you class as: (1) confusing or incomprehensible for an outsider? (2) embarrassing for an outsider? (3) welcoming and friendly to an outsider? (4) engaging and relevant for an outsider?
- c. If you were going to make just three changes to your church meeting to make it more engaging for an outsider, what would they be?
- d. If an unbeliever came to your church on any given Sunday, what would they conclude about what it means to be a 'Christ-learner' from the things you do together? Apart from the content of the sermon, what would the different aspects of the gathering communicate to them about what you believe?

2. Evangelizing on Sunday: Is your Sunday church service a place where non-Christian visitors hear the gospel?

If the word we hear and respond to in church is not constantly holding up Christ, and turning our eyes to him as Saviour and Lord, then it is not the Bible that is being preached—because the gospel of Christ is the central message and key to the whole of Scripture. He is the one to whom the whole Old Testament looks forward, and about which the whole New Testament is obsessed. Christianity does not have two messages, one for the outsider and one for the insider. The gospel word that builds someone into the church is the same word that builds them up in the church.

What does it mean, in practical terms, for Sunday church to have an evangelistic edge? It means at least four things.

- a. Preaching with an evangelistic mindset
- b. Telling stories that show the gospel at work
- c. The personal witness of congregation members
- d. The shape of what you do (We've talked above about how 'the whole way we do things' communicates something, to believers and unbelievers alike. This includes how we structure the different elements of our gathering—what has traditionally been called the 'liturgy'.

DISCUSSION

1. What aspects of your current Sunday meeting or culture have an evangelistic edge to them? Which of these do you think have the potential to be built upon or improved? How?
2. Brainstorm some new ideas for making your Sunday gatherings more evangelistic in their tone.
3. In addressing the area of preaching with an evangelistic mindset, you'll need to discuss the quality of the preaching at your church or fellowship.
4. Would the content of what is prayed for in your Sunday meetings convince someone that you were a group of people who longed to see the lost come to know Christ? How could you improve in this area?

3. Establishing on Sunday: One way of describing what is happening when we meet all together on Sunday is that Jesus is building his church—that he is present with us to speak his nourishing, life-giving word, and to move our hearts to respond to him by his Spirit. To put it another way, one of God's purposes for Sunday is transformational learning.[11] We meet together in the presence of God to be taught and edified so that we might grow to maturity in Christ (this is the 'establish' part of the growth spectrum). In our observation, most churches have plenty of room for improvement in making 'transformative learning' an intrinsic part of their Sunday culture.

a. Preaching for transformative learning 'Sermonettes create Christianettes', the old saying goes. If we want our people to keep taking steps to the right, the sermons need to stretch them and urge them forward. Transformative preaching digs into the word, unfolds and explains its message clearly and compellingly, and applies the gospel challenge of each passage to the hearts and minds and lives of the hearers.

b. Active prayerful listening - Learning is obviously a two-way experience. We can encourage and help Sunday to be a time of learning by encouraging and helping the congregation to be active listeners and learners.

c. Mutual teaching and encouragement - If we want to create a culture in which all of us are Christ-learners who seek to help other learners learn, then Sunday has to be a time when we practise and model this conviction. If the only person who has any ministry of the word on Sunday is the pastor, we send entirely the wrong message. There are two main ways we can foster and model a widespread mutual ministry of the word on Sundays: (1) we can find ways within the structure of the meeting for members of the congregation to testify and encourage the congregation. (2) we can encourage and equip our members to see Sunday as a place for mutual conversation and encouragement around the word of God.

d. Responsive repentant prayer- In many contemporary evangelical churches that we have visited, substantial corporate prayer has all but disappeared. There will be a 30-minute singing time, a 30-minute message, various announcements, promotions and interviews, musical items, and of course the taking of the offertory—but it seems that the only time we can afford to devote to prayer is a short, perfunctory request as the meeting opens, or as the sermon concludes. This is quite astonishing when you think about it, and says a great deal about what we think we are doing when we gather as God’s people. Prayer is basic to the Christian life and to church life, because it is the language of faith. Prayer is verbalized dependence on God. Moreover, our convictions tell us that transformative learning only happens when God’s Spirit sovereignly applies God’s word to human hearts. We should therefore be depending constantly on God in prayer that he would do this by his Spirit in our Sunday gatherings. These convictions should shape our congregational prayers.

e. Singing that teaches Martin Luther, as usual, captured the wonder of God’s gift of music more memorably than anyone else: A person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard music as a marvellous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs. All the same, the subject of music in church is also a Pandora’s box of worms (to squeeze as much as possible from two metaphors). We’re reluctant to open it too far, but let us make just a few comments about how singing can be part of the learning culture of your congregation. Singing is a form of emotionally super-charged speech. It consists of words that—in a way we don’t fully understand—pack more punch than words that are just spoken. This makes speech-that-is-singing a particularly powerful way of building a transformative learning culture in our Sunday meetings.

f. Declaring historic creeds and confessions - Rather like singing, reciting creeds and historic confessional statements together in church is both declaration and response. We are speaking the great truths of the faith to one another, and at the same time testifying to one another of our belief in these truths. As a regular feature of our meetings, this can be a powerful ‘learning’ experience (especially if we explain their meaning and the context in which they were written). It connects the little outpost of God’s kingdom that is our church with the historic faith that Christians from the very beginning and in all places have believed. It says to our people (and to outsiders) that we are not just a little tribe of weirdos, sticking out like a scarecrow in a cornfield. We are in fact one branch of a massive and ancient living tree whose roots go back deep.

4. Equipping ON Sunday: The culture we're wanting to build is one in which all the saints see it as their privilege and joy to be involved in transformative learning together —so that all God's People, each in their own way, Persevere in Proclaiming the word, in Prayerful dependence on the Spirit, to help others take a step to the right (the four Ps). We can equip our people for this prayerful proclamation in many ways and contexts, but Sunday itself is one important place where this equipping can take place. Here are three ways: (1) We can preach in a way that equips. There is a way of presenting a sermon such that the hearer thinks afterwards, "Wow, that was so encouraging. But I don't know how he managed to draw that message from the passage. I could never read the Bible like that." (2) Our preaching can also equip the congregation to minister the word to each other by being sharable—that is, by each sermon having as part of its application how we might share this word with someone else. (3) We can schedule regular short 'equipping' times during our Sunday gathering—for example, have one of the congregation give a brief report about how they're reading the Bible one-to-one with someone else, and what encouraging lessons and consequences have resulted.

5. Equipping FOR Sunday: Many of the suggestions and possibilities we've raised in this first focus area involve a change in the mindset, expectations and (in some cases) skills of our congregation. We've suggested (among other things) that it would be wonderful if all our members would: (1) think and pray and invite their non-Christian friends and family to church, (2) be welcoming and helpful to outsiders, visitors and newcomers, (3) be ready to share the gospel personally with non-Christian people they meet at church, (4) read the sermon passage in advance, and come prayerfully ready to learn and grow, (5) be primed to listen actively to the sermon with open, responsive hearts, (6) be enthusiastic about singing, (7) be ready and able to speak the word conversationally to others at any point during Sunday, particularly in the coffee time after church, and (8) be ready to pray with other people if the opportunity arises.

6. Stories about Sunday: To help illustrate what the various suggestions and principles might look like in practice, throughout Phases 4 and 5 we'll be sharing some real-life stories of churches that are working hard to effect the kind of culture change that the Vine Project aims to help you achieve. A few things to note with each of these stories: We've chosen a variety of different church leaders to interview for these stories—from small and large churches, from rural and urban and suburban churches, and from different denominations and traditions. These are by no means perfect churches, and many still have quite some way to go in seeing a disciple-making culture take hold. Nor do these churches all agree with each other or with us on everything. In each case, the names and details have been fictionalized, but otherwise the interview has not been enhanced or massaged to fit in with

the message of this book. The stories are real. What we've included here is just a short excerpt from a longer interview. In each case, you can find the whole interview at thevineproject.com. (Note: I am not including the stories in this summary.)

PROJECT: PLANNING TO MAKE SUNDAY A FLAGSHIP: Look back over the discussions you've had under each segment in this first focus area ('Make Sunday a flagship'). (1) Choose a few key strategies or priorities that you want to focus on over the next 12 months. Don't try to do everything! Start with four or five key things. (2) For each one of these strategies or priorities, set a simple, measurable goal. The purpose of this is threefold: it keeps clear in your mind the kind of outcome you're hoping to achieve it can sometimes give you a little push of motivation to keep going when your feet start to drag it enables you to ask some questions at the end of the year about why you did or didn't reach your goal. (3.) For each of the priorities and goals, write down the what, who, when and how much (what actions, by whom, by when, and with what resources or at what cost).

Focus Area 2: Design pathways that move to the right

In the second evaluation exercise of Phase 3, you did your best to take a snapshot of all the people in your congregation or fellowship—of where they are up to in their 'learnership' of Christ. Most groups we have done this exercise with find it a somewhat overwhelming experience. So many people. So many ministry needs. So few leaders or people equipped to help in the task. How on earth are we going to move all these people to the right, each with their own particular needs and situation in life? Given that the basic method is the four Ps of ministry (see below), then practically speaking how is that going to happen in a way that helps everyone take steps forward from all the different places they occupy on the spectrum? ... Review of the four PS of ministry (1) Proclamation of the word in multiple ways, (2) Prayerful dependence on the Spirit, (3) People are God's fellow workers, and (4) Perseverance, step by step

Part of the answer of course is the focus area we've just looked at. Our main Sunday gathering should function to move people to the right from wherever they are. But some things are hard (or almost impossible) to do in a large group meeting like church. How are we going to use every other aspect of church life to move people to the right—that is, all the different meetings and interactions, whether one-to-one, in small groups or medium-sized groups, whether in one-off events or regular structures?

The key questions we'll need to ask under each of the following headings are: What existing ministry structures or groups can we improve or what new things do we need to launch in

order to more effectively conduct 4P ministry in this area? What's the next step for people who have been ministered to in each phase? (E.g. How does someone move from being engaged to being evangelized? Or from being evangelized to being followed up and established in the faith?)

Who is going to lead these new or improved ministries or groups? What sort of equipping or training is going to be needed? This will become increasingly urgent or apparent as you work through 'Engaging', 'Evangelizing' and 'Establishing' below. You'll almost certainly find that the ideas you have for making progress in each area are not matched by the people you have available to lead them or run them. That's what the 'Equipping' stage is about! As important as the structures and leadership are, content is just as vital. What is actually being proclaimed and taught in our different groups and ministries? Is it the biblical word of Christ, or something else?

Is it a single pathway we're talking about or pathways (plural)? We'll mostly refer to pathways (plural) in the material below in recognition that you will usually create multiple paths or options for people to keep moving forward. However, in another sense you could usefully think of it as one big integrated highway on which your ministry helps people travel from 'engaging' through to 'equipping', with a number of different 'lanes' on the road that are suitable for different people and circumstances. We'll work through each of the four stages, offering some ideas and suggestions for you to mull over and discuss, and telling some stories about how churches we know are working on this. Then, at the end, you'll need to design your own draft pathways that integrate the four stages together.

Pathway stage 1: Engaging

As we've talked over many years with pastors around the world about ministry and evangelism, one theme has been distressingly common: most evangelical churches in the Western world have little or no engagement with their local communities. A generation ago, this was different in many places. The church was seen as part of the community life. Churchgoing was a normal thing to do, even if many of those who came were only nominally Christian.

How can we help people onto this first step of our pathway? We need to think about this, because it is very hard to evangelize the thousands of people living all around us in "this present darkness" if we don't know them or have any contact with them! This sort of engagement can happen in a number of contexts. (a) Personal relationship, (b) teams and groups, (c) specialized ministries or groups or events. (At this point a number of true stories are shared to illustrate how this can be done.)

DISCUSSION

- 1.** What do you know about your local community? Who lives there? What is the demographic profile for age, religious affiliation, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and so on? (If you've never done this sort of research, now would be a good time to start.)
- 2.** Are there are some obvious contact points between the nature of your surrounding community and your congregation—in the kind of people you are, or in the kinds of needs you could easily meet?
- 3.** What 'Engaging' are you currently doing? What's working well and could be built upon? What new ideas come to mind?
- 4.** Without setting anything in stone, what do you think would be the three most important moves you could make as a congregation to engage more with the people all around you?

Pathway stage 2: Evangelizing

So someone has been 'Engaged'—whether personally or through a small group or via some event or program. What comes next, as they move to the right? How are they going to hear the gospel? Again, you can think of it happening in different contexts.

a. Personally and in small groups - As with personal engagement, personal evangelism thrives where congregation members: personally grasp and embrace the convictions we clarified in Phase 1 are equipped and trained to know the gospel clearly and thoroughly, and to be able to articulate it for themselves—each in their own way, according to their own gifts and opportunities encourage and help each other to keep doing this (e.g. by it being a regular facet or theme of small group or church life).

b. Evangelistic programs or courses - Many churches use gospel courses or programs as a convenient and effective next step for someone to consider the claims of Christ. In our view two of the best are Introducing God and Christianity Explored, but there are many similar courses available. These sorts of courses have numerous advantages: They are enjoyable and engaging, and give non-Christian participants time (over several sessions) to understand the gospel, to talk about it in a relaxed small group setting, to ask their questions, and so on. They are the kind of thing that Christians can invite friends to attend with them. They can be held in homes or restaurants or on-site at church—at whatever venue would be most helpful for those you're trying to invite along.

c. Church - We won't spend much time on this point, since we've discussed it at length in Focus Area 1 ('Make Sunday a flagship'), but if church itself is a constant occasion for evangelism, then this too provides a next step for someone we've engaged with. We can invite them to church knowing that it will be an engaging and accessible experience in which they are challenged with some aspect of the gospel.

d. One-off events or missions - The era of the large-scale Billy-Graham-style mission or crusade seems to have passed, in our part of the world at least. Big events with the big (often famous or international) speakers are much less frequent than in decades gone by. Without debating all the pros and cons of 'special event' evangelism— whether as a combined church event, or within your own congregation— here's how one-off events or missions can be useful: They can serve as a focus and rallying point; something to prepare and train and pray for; something to galvanize energy and activity. The success or usefulness of these events depends in large measure on whether they are your sole evangelistic strategy or whether they are part of a broader effort of engagement and evangelism. (More personal stories are given here.)

DISCUSSION

- 1.** Look back over your evaluation exercises from Phase 3. What do they tell you about how evangelism is happening (or not) in and through your church?
- 2.** What is working well or has potential to be built upon? What new ideas come to mind?
- 3.** Without setting anything in stone, what do you think are the three most important moves you could make as a congregation to see the gospel shared more with non-Christians?

Pathway stage 3: Establishing

Just to clarify: by 'establishing' we mean that phase in the growth of a learner after they have repented and turned to Christ, where they increase in knowledge and understanding, send down deep roots of faith, and learn to grow in godliness of life as they 'keep all his commandments'. It's the maturation process of the Christian life, and thus it is lifelong. It includes following up a new believer, helping a solid Christian grow further in understanding or deal with a particular sin, encouraging and strengthening believers as they deal with hardship and suffering, and so on.

In most churches, this is where the action is. As we've worked through the evaluation exercises in Phase 3 with many pastors around the world, we've found that in the vast bulk of churches, most of the time, energy and effort of church life goes into this area—into groups, activities and ministries that help Christians to persevere in Christ and grow in their

knowledge and godliness. (We suspect that you probably discovered this about your own church in Phase 3.)

Let's look at three aspects of 'Establishing' ministries, and explore how we could improve them.

- a. Establishing new believers - When someone is converted through the ministry of your congregation, what happens next? How are they followed up? This is a vital question. Spiritually speaking, new believers are like newborn babies. They need constant feeding, they have huge amounts to learn, and they need the protection and care of their spiritual 'parents'. The first 6-12 months after someone has come to faith in Christ are both an exciting and a dangerous time.
- b. Establishing newcomers in church - People who roll through our doors as newcomers present a particular kind of 'Establishing' challenge. We have the organizational goal of establishing them as potential members of our church—of helping them arrive, settle in, get to know people, and become part of the fabric of our fellowship, and so on. But the more significant goal (although it is not unrelated of course to them joining a church) is working out how to move newcomers one step to the right—starting from wherever they happen to be. In the majority of cases, newcomers to our congregation will be some sort of Christian person, but just exactly where they are up to, and what they need in order to grow, is immensely varied. Newcomers arrive on our doorstep at all sorts of different stages along the spectrum—from someone who is not a Christian and needs to be evangelized all the way through to a very solid mature Christian who is ready and willing to dive in and be part of the ministry.
- c. Establishing growing believers - As with engaging and evangelizing, the establishing ministry that moves believers to the right can happen in multiple contexts: (1) One-to-one Bible reading relationships: this is where people meet regularly for mutual establishing, either short-term (e.g. weekly for three months) or longer-term (e.g. once a month for years). This can be very powerful because it is individual and intensive—we can dig down into issues, and challenge and admonish one another in a way that is often difficult to do in a small group. (2) Small groups: small home groups—that is, small clusters of Christ- learners who meet regularly to move each other to the right through the four Ps—remain a basic and important structure for helping believers grow to maturity. The advantages and potential of small groups for this kind of ministry are well recognized. However, as we note in our discussion in appendix iii, this potential is often not realized. In many churches, the small group 'trellis' needs significant work—in the vision of what the groups are and are trying to achieve, in the quality of leaders and the training (initial and ongoing) that they receive, in the quality of the material.

DISCUSSION

1. Which aspects of 'Establishing' do you think you're doing well at? What could you build on or improve?
2. Talk about your small groups (if you have them). What are the issues? What could you do to improve them as effective learning communities? Which new groups might you need to start? How could this central structure in your church be used better to equip disciples who make disciples? (If you haven't yet read and discussed appendix iii on 'Rethinking small groups', now would probably be a sensible time.)
3. Talk about your adult Sunday School (if you have one). How effectively is it teaching sound doctrine? What could you do to improve it? Which new classes might you need to start? How could this structure in your church be used better to equip disciples who make disciples?

Pathway stage 4: Equipping

As you've been thinking and talking through the various stages that someone might go through (from 'Engaged' right through to 'Established'), you have no doubt noticed and reflected on a constant theme—that nearly everything you might want to initiate or improve at every step of the process requires people who are motivated and available and equipped to be involved. "And we just don't have those people", we hear you say. You're right: these kinds of people—the kind who commit themselves to going to the playgroup to get to know and evangelize the non-Christian mothers—don't grow on trees. Every pastor we've ever talked to feels like he doesn't have enough of these sorts of people, and imagines how different things might be if he had.

In a recent survey of pastors who have been involved in our Vinegrowers coaching ministries, the second most common roadblock to changing the church culture was the difficulty of raising up and developing lay leaders with the vision of disciple-making. Nearly 50% of those surveyed expressed a desire for on-site training of staff and leaders—that is, they wanted someone from outside to come and do this training for them. (The author then explains how to deal with this desire.)

The 'Equipping' stage is where we generate and grow a team of fellow workers in our church to move other people to the right—and given how many people there are, and how vast the needs are, we need the biggest team of fellow workers we can get. We should also emphasize that we are not just equipping people to do jobs at church or to participate in our programs; we're equipping people to engage in 4P ministry in whatever context or opportunity God puts before them—whether that is in being a godly parent who loves and disciplines and teaches their children, or a godly worker who seeks to engage and evangelize the person in the cubicle next door.

To understand what 'Equipping' involves, let's think about it as happening at three levels.

Level 1: The penny dropping -The first and most basic step is to help Christians make this particular move to the right in their understanding: to grasp that Christ's purpose for me is that I seek with all my heart to move others around me to the right in whatever way I can. This happens, of course, like any other Christian growth—through some form of the four Ps. The primary and ongoing place this should happen is through the regular teaching of the Bible on Sunday—especially teaching that communicates the sort of mind-blowing, life- changing convictions we sharpened in Phase 1.

Level 2: Learning some basic skills - Once the motivation and desire to move others to the right is there, some practical help and skills in how to do so can be hugely helpful—especially in giving Christians the confidence that they can do it. Here are some of the basic kinds of competencies or skills that nearly every Christian should have in their kitbag: (1) how to speak the word of God to yourself—that is, how to read the Bible prayerfully as a regular part of life, (2) how to speak about Christ with non-Christians, whether in sharing one's testimony or in providing a simple explanation of the gospel, (3) how to answer common questions that are raised about Christianity, (4) how to read the Bible one-to-one with someone else (whether a Christian or a non-Christian friend,) (5) how to follow up a new or young Christian personally, (6) how to encourage and minister to others on Sunday (the 'ministry of the pew') (6) how to minister to your spouse and children.

Level 3: Learning some specialist skills - There are some ministries and some skills that require special training— that is, where someone who is already being equipped at levels 1 and 2 needs some extra training for a particular task or ministry. The most common would be: (1) how to lead a small group, (2) how to lead in children's ministry or Sunday School, (3) how to lead and minister in youth groups, and (4) how to give Bible talks or sermons.

d. Getting started with equipping

In the brief space we have here, we would suggest the following:

Getting started will almost certainly mean initially investing in a small number of current or potential leaders who can help in the equipping of others. Equipping of the kind we're talking about cannot really happen by remote control or impersonally. As we've been arguing all along, the kind of learning that is involved is personal and transformational; it requires content to not only be conveyed but exemplified and practised, prayerfully and patiently over time.

In practical terms, this may mean spending a year or more investing in the personal, transformational equipping of a smallish group of people, from whom leaders can emerge with

the heart and skills to help you equip others. Depending on who these people are, and where they are starting from, your quipping of them might range over all three levels.

With these better-equipped leaders and ‘equippers’ in place, your existing ‘Establishing’ structures (such as small groups) can be very effectively used as a vehicle for level 1 and level 2 equipping. One of the big advantages of this is that the learning can be reviewed and practised over many months, rather than relying on a short course.

The equipping gets embedded, and becomes part of the normal group life. To improve or supplement this sort of equipping in small groups, you can parachute an ‘equipper’ (usually one of the pastoral staff) into the groups, one at a time, to provide some intensive training. This can really help newer or less confident leaders to learn how to replicate this kind of training in the future.

For the concrete thinkers among you, the approach we’re advocating might look like this:

Year 1—gather a small group of (say) ten people, and spend roughly a third of the year each on levels 1, 2 and 3 equipping. The aim by year’s end is to have (say) six new or significantly matured leaders who are ready to help you equip others through small groups.

Year 2—mentor and support these six new leaders as they start equipping the people in their small groups; meet with these leaders regularly, and parachute into their groups for (say) four-week stints to help them with equipping. Also in Year 2, look for another ten people to work with more intensively.

As well as working through existing small group structures, many churches supplement this with special training seminars or events or other structures. We know of some churches that put aside a 10-week block where all the small groups come together to focus particularly on level 1 and level 2 equipping. Some churches have an additional structure—a ‘school for Christian ministry’ or a strand of their adult Sunday School classes—that provides constant opportunities for equipping. There are many ways to do it.

If your groups are starting to function well, with levels 1 and 2 equipping happening more widely, then new potential leaders will begin to emerge from those groups. At some point, you will need to draw them aside for some more intensive level 3 equipping for leadership. Some churches take potential new leaders out of their normal small group for six months, and provide intensive equipping or training in leadership—that is, this ‘leadership training’ group functions as their small group for that period.

Continuing to meet regularly with your leaders is critical. As a minimum you should draw all your small group leaders together for training and discussion quarterly. Better still, gather a

group of leaders together monthly in your home to talk and pray about their groups, to be equipped in some aspect of leadership, and to encourage each other (as a team of leaders) to stick with the task.

We've observed a growing number of churches that ask some experienced leaders to step out of leading a group or class to equip and mentor other leaders. By visiting the groups occasionally, these mentors see the strengths and weaknesses of the leaders and can work on their development.

e. Equipping leads to exporting

Of the tinkering with models and acronyms there is no end. We've been in churches where extra Es were always being thought of: Edifying, Encouraging, Expanding, and of course Eating.

But before we conclude our look at designing pathways, we would like to commend one additional E for consideration, as a kind of extension to equipping—and that's Exporting. One of the many fruitful consequences of effectively equipping people as disciple-makers is that an increasing number of people want to spend more and more time in 4P ministry. They get frustrated at having to spend so much time working for a living, and will often try to limit their work hours in some way so as to free up more time for ministry. It's from these sorts of people that the next generation of pastors, teachers and evangelists arises.

As we equip people, we need to be on the lookout for 'people worth watching' (as we labelled them in *The Trellis and the Vine*)—that is, those who have the character and gifts to be apprenticed and trained as full-time gospel workers. In fact, if we are to be true to our convictions about God's worldwide plans in Christ, we will long to raise up more workers of all kinds for the harvest, and send them out to do 4P ministry in other places where the need is urgent.

DISCUSSION

1. What 'Equipping' are you currently doing at the three levels mentioned above?
2. Do your members feel that they have a sort of 'ministry career path' in your church, to learn and grow in ministry leadership? Or do they get stuck in the same roles?
3. For level 3 equipping (specialist skills): (a) For your church, is the leadership bar too low or high? (b) Do your leaders embody the vision and culture you are creating? (c) Is leadership in your church seen as a burden or as a motivating challenge? (d) What will be the main obstacles in your church for training new leaders effectively? How will you over-come these? (e) Identify by name your current level 3 leaders. (f) Identify by name your potential level 3 leaders. (g) Evaluate the effectiveness of your current leadership training processes. What leadership

training programs need to be created? Who will form and lead these? (h) How will you embed a coaching culture in your leadership development? What will be the benefits?

4. If you had to choose just three important initiatives or improvements to your equipping, what would they be?

PROJECT: GETTING STARTED

Having looked through the four stages of building a pathway through your ministries, and no doubt generated lots of discussion and ideas, the task now is actually to bring some order to all the chaos of possibilities, and design some pathways—that is, an aligned, co-ordinated, integrated set of activities, events, ministries, meetings and/or small groups through which each person can make progress towards Christ and towards maturity in Christ (from ‘Engaging’ through to ‘Equipping’).

We suggest that you initially design the pathway or structure you’d like to see in place in two years time. There will no doubt be aspects of it that already exist now, and that you can work on improving and aligning. But setting your sights for two years time will allow the space to figure out what sort of equipping you need to do now (and over the next 18 months or so) in order to have the people and leaders in place to make that pathway work—because you will almost certainly lack them at this point in time.

Planning pathways will mean working out: which current activities have potential and should be part of the pathway (usually with some improvements or tweaks) which current ministries or activities don’t really contribute, and should be wound down what new ministries or groups are needed what equipping and training will be needed for each of these. (At this point in The Vine Project an example of the kind of thing you might come up with is given.)

Focus Area 3: Plan for growth

In many ways, what we’re trying to do in the Vine Project is produce growth—growth in people and growth in numbers, as more people are engaged, evangelized and established in God’s church through the 4P ministry we do as his fellow workers.

This leads to a key question that we need to face now at this point of the process, because it will shape some key decisions along the way: What if it works?

Thinking about growing What if, under God, the work you do in the Vine Project over the next few years sees significant growth in your congregational numbers—more people converted and established, more people in groups of all kinds, more people on Sundays, more people to follow up and work with? What if your congregation numbers doubled (say) in the next seven years?

How would you cope with that growth? Do you have the facilities? How would it change your staff requirements? How would it change the way you organized and ran things?

“Well,” you might say, “that would be a great problem to have!” And so it would. But here’s the thing: the more that you and your congregation dream of that level of growth, pray for that level of growth, organize yourself around that level of growth, and plan for that level of growth, the more likely you are to see it happen.

If you aspire to double your numbers in seven years, but you have buildings and facilities that won’t accommodate those numbers, you have four options: (1) plant one or more new congregations in a new location, (2) plant one or more new congregations at another time in your own building, (3) extend the size of your building (or move to a bigger building), (4) give up on your goal of doubling in seven years.

There are also spiritual dangers in having ambitious plans: (1) you might begin to lust for the glory and reputation that accrues to the minister of a large and growing church; (2) you might be tempted to build a feel-good, people-pleasing ministry in order to attract the crowds; (3) you might start to treat people like objects, and lose the compassionate inefficiency that leaves the 99 in order to seek after the one; (4) you might start exaggerating or fudging the facts to protect your credibility (i.e. by making out that goals are being achieved when they’re not); (5) you might fall into the unprincipled pragmatism that follows any ministry method that ‘gets results’.

All these dangers need to be recognized and avoided. But the alternative spiritual danger is often even more perilous: that we retreat into a loveless inward-looking smallness that has no compassion on the lost multitudes all around us.

DISCUSSION AND PLANS

- 1.** Where are the greatest needs and potential for engagement and evangelism in your local community or context? Which groups of people do you think you could most effectively connect with and reach?
- 2.** Toss about some stretching but achievable numbers for your congregation in some of these areas: (a) the number of non-Christian people converted in the next five years; (b) the number of Sunday attenders at church in the next five years; (c) the number of congregations in your network’ (d) the number of small clusters of learners (i.e. small groups)
- 3.** What would be the implications of these sorts of numbers for: (a) your physical property and resources? (b) the possibility of planting new fellowships or churches to reach your goals?

4. With these larger longer-term growth goals in mind, look back over your priorities and plans for improving Sunday and for your ministry pathways: (a) What would you change or prioritize differently? Does that change the mix? (b) How do these growth goals affect your plans at each stage of the pathway—engaging, evangelizing, establishing, equipping? (c) What’s missing?

5. Having looked back through your other plans, come back to the rough numbers you were tossing around in question 2. Settle on some numbers that you want to pray about, that you think are stretching but doable, and that serve to finalize and drive your plans and actions in the other areas.

6. Now go back again through all your plans and actions in Focus Areas 1 and 2, and finalize the priorities and actions you’re going to put into effect.

If you need help: (1) God may well have blessed you with people in your church who have a high degree of professional skill in this area. Spend time with some of these people; help them to grow in conviction and in having a heart for the gospel, and draw on their experience and wisdom in effective planning. (2) Get hold of a copy of Craig Hamilton’s *Wisdom in Leadership* if you have not done so already. It’s the best single-volume compendium we’ve seen of wise, practical help on a huge range of everyday ministry issues, all within an excellent Reformed-evangelical theological framework. (3) Make the most of the online support community atthevineproject.com to ask questions and to get ideas and resources for effective ministry planning and implementation.

Focus Area 4: Create a new language

Language shapes culture. If we want to change ‘the whole way we do things around here’, we’ll need to change the language people use and the categories in which people think about ‘the way we do things around here’. We’ll need to teach our congregations a new way of talking—one that our people can understand and relate to, but which signals and communicates the direction in which we’re trying to head.

In other words, you need to work out a plan for comprehensively communicating the vision that you have crafted for becoming a ‘transformative learning community’, or for ‘moving to the right’, or whatever terms or descriptions you have come up with. You’ve already done some of this work back in Phase 1 in clarifying your convictions, and writing some basic communication pieces (e.g. a simple statement, a manifesto, a vision presentation).

Now you’re a bit further down the track. You’ve made progress in drafting some plans. You have more of an idea of the key priorities you want to work on over the next few years, including some major goals for gospel growth.

It's time to start communicating all of this—the convictions and the new way of thinking about 'learning Christ', the pathways to move people forward (from engaging through to equipping), the bigger long-term goals that you're dreaming and praying about reaching, and so on.

Let's look at how that communication can happen both explicitly and implicitly.

Explicit communication

In particular, you need to craft some clear communication that answers four key questions. Fortunately, everything that you've done to this point should help you answer these questions pretty quickly:

- a.** What sort of church does God want us to be? (This is often called 'vision', and is driven by the theological convictions we sharpened in Phase 1.)
- b.** Under God, how are we going to get to that future? (These are the broad means or strategies that we are going to use, and again flow out of our convictions from Phase 1 about the four Ps of ministry, moving to the right, and so on.)
- c.** What are our specific goals for growth in the next (say) five years? (These are the specific goals for growth that you have just worked through in Focus Area 3.)
- d.** What are our specific priorities or plans for reaching those goals? (These are the other focus areas you've worked through in this phase—i.e. 'Making Sunday a flagship' and 'Designing pathways'—as well as any major practical steps that are required, such as employing staff or making property decisions.)

Implicit communication

As well as communicating your vision explicitly (and often), you also want it to become a constant note—like the sound of a tuning fork—that resonates through your congregational life. Here are some ideas for how you can achieve this:

Give some thought to changing the names of some of your ministries or elements in your 'pathway', so that they reflect the vision you want to communicate.

As you plan the weekly corporate prayers in your main church gathering, use some of the main categories or labels or language of your vision to shape your prayers. If the four Es were part of your language, for example, you could focus on praying for engaging, evangelizing, establishing and equipping ministries on different weeks.

Keep relating the preaching to aspects of the vision, when the Bible passage takes you there. When you're announcing or advertising or reporting back on church events or activities, keep

using the language of your vision to describe them, to show how they fit into the larger picture of what you're all doing together.

Share stories of how people are becoming Christians and growing, how they are learning to be Christ-like day to day, how they are being persecuted for standing up for Christ, and so. The telling of stories is perhaps the most important form of implicit communication. Whether in testimonies or interviews during the Sunday gathering, or in email newsletters or video clips or other documents, there are few things more powerful than hearing real people talk about how they are beginning to live the disciple-making culture you are wanting to see grow.

PROJECT: DEVELOP A COMMUNICATION PLAN

- 1.** Look back over the draft manifesto you put together at the end of Phase 1. Is there anything you'd like to change or improve?
- 2.** Boil down the manifesto to some simple statements that answer the two big-picture questions about your church culture: (a) What sort of church does God want us to be? (b) Under God, how are we going to get to that future?
- 3.** Devise a communication plan for how you are going to: (a) explain, expound and persuade the congregation of the truth of these statements through sermons, web presentations, video clips, vision presentations, meetings with leaders, and so on; (b) keep repeating and disseminating these statements as widely and often as possible. (At this point the authors suggest a possible planning template.)

PHASE 5 OF THE VINE PROJECT IS MAINTAIN MOMENTUM

Understanding the obstacles:

Changing 'the way we do things around here' never happens quickly or easily. Our shared language, practices, habits, structures, activities, traditions, accepted wisdom, symbols, rituals and relationships have all been bedded down over a considerable period of time—sometimes centuries.

Every culture has a certain weight or inertia to it, like one of those roly-poly wobbly man toys that you can push over but which always rights itself and returns to its former position. As we've already noted more than once, changing a culture takes some persistence. It's not a commando operation; it's more like an extended land war in Asia.

But there is also the inherent difficulty of implementing any plan successfully in our world, given the natural forces of chaos and entropy. People are fallible; they make mistakes or fail to

follow through on their promises. The world is complex, and we can't factor in every circumstance or variable in our plans. The future is unknown to us, and may bring an unexpected change that wrecks our plans entirely.

All of this is just the ocean we sail on. Any attempt at 'culture change' in any organization in our world—whether a business or government agency or school—will face these headwinds.

But as we seek to bring culture change to churches, we face an additional primary-level obstacle: sin. I suppose we might say that the general entropy and frustration of doing anything in the world is a result of sin and the fall, but in church culture-change the presence of sin is more acute. This is because what we're seeking to do is move our whole church culture, and the people who inhabit it, in the direction of godliness and maturity in Christ. If our convictions are right, the kind of change we're talking about is not just an organizational realignment or a new strategic approach—it's a repentance towards Christlikeness.

2. The pressure on pastors

In *The Trellis and the Vine*, we wrote briefly about the different ways that pastors see themselves and their roles. We talked about the pastor-as-service-providing-clergyman and the pastor-as-CEO and the pastor-as trainer. We might add to that recent calls for pastors to be missional leaders, shepherd-leaders, and who knows what else.

Not all of this is faddish (although some of it is). As we've talked personally with many hundreds of pastors, there is a widespread feeling that traditional views and expectations of the pastor's role are outmoded and have been for some time.

One hugely significant shift is simply in the changing patterns of regular social churchgoing. Many of our traditions and expectations of pastoral ministry belong to an era in which a sizable proportion of the population went to church regularly.

Perhaps the most cataclysmic change has been in the way many churches approach evangelism. In the era where large numbers of nominal 'Christians' came to church, there was more than enough 'missional' work to do in simply evangelizing the non-Christians who came to church or brought their children to Sunday School every week. The idea of having to go out to the community, make contact with the unbelievers who were out there, and share the gospel with them—this simply wasn't on the agenda. There was no need, and no time, come to that.

This is no longer the case almost anywhere in the Western world (and hasn't been for decades). There are some pockets of the United States where it still may be like this, but even there it is changing rapidly.

However, even though the landscape has changed drastically, many churches still have expectations of ministry and of the pastor that belong to this bygone era. And many pastors themselves grapple with what their role is in the rapidly changing, increasingly spiritually hostile climate they inhabit. Is my role to protect and guard and feed the sheep? Or is it to go out into the world and find the lost sheep?

3. The pressure on our people

It's not just pastors who are feeling the heat. In fact, as we've talked with pastors about building a disciple-making culture in their churches, many have commented that their people are under massive pressure—in demanding or hostile workplaces, in struggling marriages, with sick children or ageing parents, with chronic health problems, and with all the other troubles and complications of living in this fallen world. Pastors have said to us, “It's all very well to talk about training our people to be disciple-makers, but I feel like our people are just struggling to survive from one day to the next. We have a hard enough time just getting people to turn up most Sundays—let alone starting anything new or extra!”

The first and most important thing to say is that we must understand and respond to the pressure our people are under theologically, in terms of what the Bible says about this fallen world. The kind of pressure we're talking about is situation normal in this present darkness, and its most significant effect is the temptation it brings to abandon Christ, to retreat into the darkness, to give up our hope, to yield to despair.

In other words, learning Christ (as we described and defined it in Phase 1, Conviction 2) is not an academic or theoretical exercise that we make time for after we get life sorted out. Learning Christ means precisely learning to trust in him and put our hope in him in the midst of all the complications, troubles and pressures of life. And just as growth in Christlikeness in the midst of life's pressure is exactly what being a disciple is about, so helping people do this through 4P ministry is exactly what being a 'transformational learning community' is about.

4. Leadership, staffing and governance

In a landscape where both shepherd and sheep are under considerable pressure, building the right kind of leadership team will be critical. At some point, if you are going to gain any sort of momentum in your Vine Project plans, you will need to address three related questions:

Who should be on the team that leads the growth of 4P ministry in our congregation? This is the really the outgrowth of your Vine Project Team—the group of people who understand the culture you're wanting to build, and who take the lead in helping to build it. For the sake of this discussion, let's call this 'the leadership team'.

What full-time and part-time paid staffing is required to support and lead the growth of the ministry? Very often, the staff team would overlap significantly with the leadership team, although in most churches they wouldn't be identical.

How does all this relate to the official governance structures of our congregational life? The church committee, the session, the parish council, the eldership, the deacons, or whatever labels these, structures have in your part of the world—we'll refer to this below as 'the governance team'.

This is a difficult subject to write about, because we know the circumstances of our readers are very diverse. Some of you will be in churches where the answer to all three questions could simply be 'the elders'; others will be in churches where there aren't any 'elders' at all (not by name, at least). However, most churches have these three identifiable groups or levels of leadership in some form or other. There will be considerable overlap between them, but they are not identical. (1) The Leadership Team, (2) The Governance Team, and (3) The Staff Team.

5. Practical skills in maintaining momentum

a. Make the right sort of plans - A key aspect of maintaining momentum is to make sure you have the right sort of plans to start with. If your plans are vague, unrealistic, poorly expressed, it is very unlikely that they will gain much traction or have much longevity. It's difficult to make much progress when people aren't sure exactly what to do and when, or when they don't know even know if progress is being made or not because there's nothing in the plans to indicate what progress might look like.

If your plans are going to be understood, embraced and put into effect over time, they need to: (a) be clearly and simply expressed in plain English, (b) be sufficiently well-defined and specific that everyone knows what they are, and could say whether or not you've made progress in achieving them (one way to test this is to ask whether any sort of measure or metric could be applied to aspects of the plan), (c) be exciting and fresh but realistic in scope—that is, you need a small set of priorities or critical factors that you want to put your energies into; if the plan is too vast and has too many 'priorities', they cease to be priorities and become a wish-list be applicable to as many aspects of your congregational life as possible—a key factor in building and maintaining momentum is to have plans that everyone can grasp and be part of, whether in the men's ministry or youth or women's Bible study or whatever; good quality plans help everyone to work together towards the same goal. (d) have someone assigned to each step or action, who is responsible for driving it forward, and (e) have realistic time frames attached to the different steps or actions.

b. Review, learn, adapt

The plans you made in Phase 4, and have now revised and improved, are no doubt first class. But if normal experience is anything to go by, within the first 12 months you will face some surprises—some things will flop, others will unexpectedly take off, unavoidable delays or problems will sidetrack you, and so on. In other words, unlike the laws of the Medes and the Persians (which can never be changed), your plans need constant monitoring and review and adjustment. You will need to pause at regular intervals and check how things are going, talk honestly about progress, and make changes to your plans where necessary.

c. Identify gaps in practical skills

The following practical skills are more important for leading in culture change than we might think. And it's worth being honest about what capabilities are missing in your context. If you can look back at a repeated cycle of making plans that are never implemented effectively, there might be a skill deficit. It's not hard to work out what practical skills would be valuable in leading and managing our ministries, especially if we are trying to make significant changes. For example: personal management and controlling the diary, leading teams and team meetings, managing ministry projects, developing and running training programs, coaching skills and delegating skills.

These kinds of gaps can be addressed in various ways: by attending to the personal development of team members (there are many resources, books and programs available, both Christian and secular, which can help pastors or other team members improve their practical skills in these areas) by adding new members to your team with particular strengths in these areas by using the gifts and experience of current church members.

The support community at thevineproject.com will also provide resources for developing practical skills in leading and managing disciple-making ministries.

Epilogue

Perhaps your emotions upon arriving at this final page of The Vine Project are similar to ours as authors. At this point we are feeling exhilarated, excited, exhausted, overwhelmed, anxious and hopeful all at once.

We've shared the word of God with you, and sought to clarify and sharpen from the Bible what discipling, disciple-making, ministry and church life are really about (Phase 1). We've patiently applied those convictions to your own heart and life (Phase 2). We've then sought to help you think through what your convictions mean in practical terms for those around you—for the whole culture of your church, and for the lost world that is waiting to be reached (Phases 3 and 4). We've talked about the challenge of patiently and persistently keeping at the whole process of culture change in the face of many pressures and difficulties (Phase 5).

And through it all, we've been praying, and will continue to pray, that God will work by his Spirit through these very human and imperfect words of ours to help you make progress, one step at a time. In other words, we've been trying to move you and your whole church to the right by the word of God.

Your privilege and challenge now is to go and do likewise. The task is simple enough to describe, but of course impossible to do—save for the transforming power of God, who alone makes us competent for such a ministry, and who shines his glorious light in the hearts of those to whom we proclaim the gospel of his Son.

To him be the glory.

APPENDICES

1. The Trellis and the Vine: What did you miss?
2. <https://thevineproject.com/> Online resources and connecting with others working on the Vine Project
3. Rethinking small groups

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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