

# THE CHURCH THAT I WOULD BUILD

BY TODD HUNTER, FORMER NATIONAL DIRECTOR, AVC USA

*ON JULY 21<sup>ST</sup>, 1999, IN THE FINAL SESSION OF VINEYARD USA'S NATIONAL PASTOR'S CONFERENCE, TODD HUNTER GAVE A CLOSING "WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?" ADDRESS AS THE VINEYARD HEADS INTO THE NEXT MILLENNIUM. THE RESPONSE TO THAT ADDRESS HAS BEEN SIGNIFICANT, AND WE THOUGHT MANY OF YOUR MIGHT LIKE READING IT FOR YOURSELF. HERE, THEN, ARE A FEW EDITED SELECTIONS BASED ON THAT TALK.*

Twenty years ago I sat in John Wimber's back yard while we daydreamed about churches for the Baby Boom generation. We called them "Rock Generation" churches. John introduced me to what he had learned as a consultant at Fuller about tearing down "stained glass barriers" to reach my generation for Christ. When I was 23 years old Debbie and I headed off to Wheeling, West Virginia to do just that, and planted our first church.

The same kind of intellectual and spiritual energy I felt for building churches then is what I feel today, as we endeavor to tell the Christian story to a new generation. Some of this energy is rooted in a vision I had a few months ago, where I saw nothing but a sea of big, black Doc Marten boots walking past me. (Understand that, for me, Doc Martens represent GenXers. Be assured that you will never catch me in pair of them myself.) I couldn't determine where they were headed—I just knew they were moving somewhere eternally. And then I heard God speak to me just like He did twenty years ago, and say "Now it's your job to help the Vineyard learn to make churches for the postmodern world."

I want to tell you—knowing what I know now—what I would do if God were to let me go out and start a church today. It grips my heart to know that, on our watch as ministers of Christ, the biggest societal shift in three hundred years – the shift to postmodernity – is underway. I am excited to just be alive right now because, on our watch, we have the responsibility and privilege of leadership in what is clearly a crucial moment in the history of humankind.

## ON VINEYARD'S SELF-IDENTITY:

I want to make a key point regarding Vineyard's self-identity. Over the last twenty years we helped advance an important corrective regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in the evangelical church. The legitimacy of spiritual gifts and the importance of worship is hardly even talked about any more. It's hard to find anyone who is willing to argue for cessationism. But our fifteen-year-old self-concept as "the best of evangelicalism and Pentecostalism" has become tired and meaningless. Such distinctions mean increasingly less to the wider church because God has used us - and others - to tear down the barriers between the charismatic and conservative wings of the evangelical church. The average person hardly knows the difference between all the terms.

But, here's the question: to what end did God help us advance this paradigm? What for? My contention is that it is now time to alter our self-identity. Jack Hayford said an important thing to us. Speaking about wineskins he said, "New does not come piecemeal." It's true. What we are facing in our society and in the church is going to require wholesale, not piecemeal, changes. So let me say, as leaders in this movement, it is time for us to hear the voice of God afresh. This is a new era.

One of the main problems with our current self-identity is that we have defined ourselves primarily vis-a-vis the church. Thus, while being "the best of both worlds" was a crucial insight on the part of John Wimber, what has happened—and this has happened in most every movement in the history of the Church—is that over a period of twenty years a crucial and helpful corrective from God has become reduced in the minds of many to something like a marketing strategy. "The best of both worlds" has become our way of positioning ourselves ecclesiastically, of contrasting ourselves with Calvary Chapel, say, or Toronto, or whatever spectrum of the church from which you are trying to distinguish yourself.

There is little power in that approach. It is fundamentally divisive. Our identity needs to be about something that is a million times more profound. I suggest we alter our self-identity around a phrase one of our board members mentioned during a recent meeting. The phrase comes from Karl Barth: "Being the church for the sake of the world." And my way of describing a "church for the sake of the world" would be contained in the phrase, "God's Missional Communities." That, in a nutshell, is where we're going.

## On Being a Godward Church

When I think of Godward churches, I think of God's Kingdom—God expressing his rule and reign through the church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Miroslav Volf wrote a book called *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* in which he mentions growing up in a little village in Yugoslavia where his father was a Pentecostal pastor. He says that he learned two lessons about the life of the church there.

First, No church without the reign of God. “When the windows facing toward the reign of God get closed, darkness descends upon the churches and the air becomes heavy. When the windows facing toward the reign of God are opened, the life-giving breath and light of God give the churches fresh hope.” To which I say, “Come, Holy Spirit. Come, reign of God, into our churches and into our ministries.” The second lesson Volf says he learned, though, is this: No reign of God without the church. It is only through the church—as she exists in obedience to God—that he does his work in the world.

### **On Holding Onto the Signs of the Kingdom**

About a year ago I went up to USC to have lunch with Dallas Willard. As we were finishing up, Dallas turned to me and, in his gentle, quiet way said, “Todd, my concern for you guys is that in the history of ideas, followers rarely understand pioneering leaders.” I looked at him kind of like the disciples looked at Jesus when they said, “This is a hard saying!” I knew Dallas was saying something profound, but I wasn’t getting it. So I said, “What?” And Dallas said, “Todd, you must ensure that Vineyard churches maintain the visible signs of the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God, or else Vineyard churches will never maintain the faith for discipleship or evangelism or anything else.”

Dallas went on to say something that I replayed in my head as I drove home: “Todd, I go to churches all the time where the people’s hunger for piety is enormously high, but they live in constant frustration because they don’t have the accompanying faith that God really could change who they are—because they never see signs of God doing things. If you want your pastors to have the faith for evangelism, if you want them to have the faith for changed lives, you have to maintain the visible signs of the Holy Spirit.”

This is something us “seeker sensitive” guys need to think through. I’ve been a committed evangelist my entire ministry. The last church I pastored was very “seeker” in its orientation. Were I to start again, I would still be intentionally sensitive to those who aren’t followers of Jesus. But I would want to do it in a way that holds onto the supernatural. That is something we must not let go of.

### **On Re-thinking Evangelism**

I would want to do church in a way that doesn’t “dumb down” our faith, and that repeatedly tells our distinctive Christian story. We need to understand that conversion is about helping people go through the process of a paradigm shift—that conversion includes unashamedly teaching people a new vocabulary, telling them new stories, and letting them experiment with the distinctive practices of a particular community. We must remember that the church is a peculiar people that defines itself by an entirely different set of assumptions than those of the world. We need to recognize that we are not helping seekers when we try to explain the Way of Christ in language that is primarily therapeutic or managerial. We need to help them learn a new language and new way of seeing the world.

Suppose, for instance, I invite a friend who knows absolutely nothing about baseball to a major league baseball game. When we walked into the stadium and sat down, would you expect me to go down to the field and ask those running the game to change the rules so the game would be more “accessible” for my guest? Suppose my friend is from England and therefore understands the game of cricket. Would you expect me to ask the umpires to modify the game to sound like cricket? No. My friend comes expecting to see baseball being played—he would rightly feel an obligation to learn about baseball. And we would hope that the players played the game well enough—in a way that was intriguing and interesting and exciting—that people who don’t understand baseball would want to learn!

One of the reasons we are increasingly without a voice in our culture is that we’ve “dumbed down” Christianity to a ludicrous level. Well, perhaps it’s time we help people begin to learn a new vocabulary, hear some new stories, and experiment with some distinctive practices. And perhaps it’s time that Christians live lives that are so intriguing, so interesting, so compelling, that people naturally want to understand what it is that causes us to live the way we do.

Here’s a thought, as we consider the pursuit of Godward churches: Is man seeking God or is God seeking man? Perhaps man is hiding, pretending to seek God, but is really looking for a safe and predictable “god.” And maybe as we dumb Christianity down, we play right into this scheme by becoming vendors of religious goods and services in order to meet people’s pretend needs. Think it over.

### **On Being Resident Aliens**

A Godward church will not be intimidated by increasingly being pushed to the margins of society. We must come to grips with the fact that this is where Christianity is headed in American society. And, frankly, that’s very exciting to me. You may not realize this but—as I understand church history and the New Testament—the church thrived, had its greatest beauty and greatest power, when it was on the margins of society, not eating from the tables of societal power.

That means we're once again entering an era in which the church just might be at her best! Instead of pursuing grand schemes for obtaining power, a better strategy might be this: take your place on the margins, get filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, and do what John Wesley said—set yourself afire, go into society, and let them watch you burn.

Now would be a good time to educate yourself on how Israel acted in exile. It would be a wonderful Bible study this year, in the year 2000, to teach through the book of Daniel—not eschatologically, but in terms of how one ought to act in an unbelieving, hostile environment. And then do a little reading about the Diaspora. Figure out what the church did when it was rejected in Jerusalem and was told that they had no part in their society. What you'll find is that whenever the church received no preferential treatment or privileged position, God was most sovereign. I think we are all just spoiled by the assumptions of Christendom. Well, those days are over. Time to get used to it. Time for us to become what Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon call “resident aliens—an adventurous colony in a society of unbelief.” I've always been an adventurous person. Now I'm wanting to lead a movement of adventurous people in the postmodern world of unbelievers.

### **On Being a Missional Church**

What I mean to say here is that we're not just “a people.” We're a people for the sake of the world. I love the phrase that George Hunsberger and others use, that we are a sent people. Unfortunately, we have a tendency as evangelicals to understand what we are saved from, and less of an understanding of what we're saved for.

In God's design, the Church exists for God's mission in the world. God is himself missional. The Trinity is well understood in its calling and sending activities. The Church understands its missional purpose by observing and imitating the love of God for the world.

So, then, the church I would build would take seriously “equipping the saints” for meaningful ministry. In my judgment, John Wesley is a great example of leading a godly, missional people. He so perfectly blended community and mission. He had very laid-out methods for classes and societies where people learned to be disciples. But the early Methodists are also famous for their circuit riding, for their preaching, for their sending. They are a beautiful example of what it's like to be “living stones” (1 Peter 1:4-5), as Peter calls Christians.

However, I sometimes find in pastors that, psychologically, we really don't like leading living stones, because they can be trouble. You're trying to build a wall, and “the stones” are hard to control. You put a stone in, but because it's living it has its own mind and is moving around in the neat, ideal little wall you are trying to build.

The problem, my friends, is that the alternative is dead stones. You can control them. But there's no life of the Spirit there. Wesley found a way to loose these living stones, making them increasingly mature Christians, so that they became a “sent” community living winsomely and powerfully in the public arena. Many of them actually became the circuit riding preachers because Wesley knew that they were the ones who had the intuition necessary to reach their people.

So, the church that I would build would aim to be a “sent” community, a body of people sent on a mission. And that means that we need to be deeply in the world. Tragically, I'm finding that some of our pastors have it in reverse: they are of the world but are never really in it. We need to ensure that we are neither intimidated about marginalization nor worldly and captured by it's the world's distractions.

Rather, God has called us to be a display—a foretaste—of the reign of God in the midst of the real world. That means that not only do we have a message to announce, but we are actually to embody that message in our daily lives. Thus, we would never conceive of ourselves as local churches “with” a mission program; we need to understand that we are in fact missionary congregations. Emil Brunner said, “Mission is to the church as burning is to fire.”

We must recognize that we are perhaps now in a more difficult cross-cultural situation than some congregations reaching out halfway around the world. The Christian-pagan distinction is every bit as powerful here as anything the church faces in India or Asia. It's time for us to learn to be missionaries. Mission can never be merely what the church “does.” Mission is who we are. The community of God is, at its most fundamental level, a missionary encounter with every city, suburb, and village in this universe.

### **On True Community**

The church that I would build would be a community of Christians who believe the Gospel so much that they actually order their lives around it.

Unfortunately, the statistics (from Barna, etc.) I've seen suggest there is little difference between the world and Christians when it comes to behaviors such as renting pornographic movies, giving to the poor, or getting divorced. If you've seen those stats, they are enormously depressing.

Our hope is to become an alternative community—one in which the world can see that we actually believe in Jesus so much, that we've attributed so much intelligence to him, so much worthiness, that we matter-of-factly order our lives around becoming like him. Actually being a peculiar people, a community intentionally living under the reign of God, would be a compelling argument for the Story of God in the world.

The church community I would build would not be denominationally-oriented. I do not think that differing expressions of Christianity are necessarily a bad thing, but four hundred years of denominationalism have been a major driving force in creating the consumer Christians who you now pull your hair out trying to pastor. Choice has been exploited for hundreds of years. In 1800 there were thirty-six denominations in America. Today there are over four hundred. The problem I have with a denominational orientation is that it's an inward focus derived from a negative reaction to others. As Lesslie Newbigen says, denominationalism ends up being a type of secularism—a group form of privatized religion.

It's time we re-discover our fundamental unity with the rest of the Body of Christ. I get up every morning not thinking, "Well, I'm not Toronto, I'm not Kansas City, I'm not Hank Hanegraaff or John MacArthur or Bill Hybels or Rick Warren." That is not my orientation. My orientation is, "Those are my brothers, and they are all doing the very best they know how to do to serve God. We see their errors, they see ours. But they are our brothers." I say to them, "My orientation is for God and for serving you, and we recognize our fundamental unity long before we recognize our minor differences."

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### **On Being Counter-Cultural**

Gordon Fee says, "The Christian community is called to manifest an alternative social order of Spirit-empowered Christlikeness." The Christian community should, by definition, be counter-cultural without being escapist. Lives of sacrifice, humility, modesty, self-discipline, and preferring others are not always going to be considered normal in popular society. But the church of Jesus needs to challenge the worldly norms around it, not with signs held up that say, "God hates gays!" but with lives of such love and goodness that it defies understanding, doesn't make sense to the world around, and that causes outsiders to ask, "What is it that causes you to live this way?"

Why did Christianity spread so rapidly in the early years of the church? Over and over again we can see that the first Christians didn't out-argue pagans—they outlived them. Their relation to the world was proactive instead of reactionary. They simply made Jesus their master, and routinely gave to those who stole from them, loved those who were persecuting them, blessed those who cursed them, lived humbly, and laid down their lives for others. And it was in observing these communities of people that outsiders saw and understood the Gospel.

So the communities we want to make in our churches should neither be fear-based, afraid of the dark, immoral world we live in—nor should our churches be merely a "safe harbor." No, the church belongs out in the very middle of the terrible waves of life. That's where God is, you know. We should follow him there.

Additionally, the church that I would build would be multicultural and multiethnic. This is something AVC leaders are giving a lot of thought and prayer to. It's something that I've been praying about since I was here pastoring at the Anaheim Vineyard in the late 80's. I have often dreamed of planting Hispanic churches; Bob Fulton [Coordinator of Vineyard International Consortium] has now taken it much, much farther than I was ever able to get it. But if I were going out to plant a church today, I would be intentionally making it multicultural, multiethnic, and multigenerational.

Additionally, the church I would build would be a passionate, worshipping community. Worshipping Jesus is natural and should not be hidden. The world pays homage to its leaders, and I think will not take us seriously if we don't lift up Jesus, as well. We must remember that our "different-ness" is powerful if it is winsomely lived out.

One other word about worship. We obviously need to keep our intimate worship. But it needs to be intelligible. And I would suggest we also need to learn to worship God in a more full-orbed way, so that our worship is not merely casual and relational, but also transcendent. Where does a sense of mystery enter into our forms of worship? What about awe? We need to think through the fact that the medium—even in music and forms of worship—is not value-neutral or inconsequential.

## **Where We Go From Here**

How, then, shall we begin? As I was thinking about this the past few weeks, I was reminded of being in this little nondescript hotel room in Indianapolis, Indiana when I oversaw the pastors in the area years ago. During those years I often read a book or listened to a tape or went to a Fuller seminar, and then I'd come back to the Midwest, gather us all in this hotel room and say, "Let's learn together."

I'm ready to do that again all over America. Anywhere you can gather hungry Vineyard pastors who want to learn to be Godward missional communities for the sake of the world, I'll be there.

We can do this together. You older, successful guys—you've done it once, you can do it again. Help lead us into being God's missional churches.

You older, less-successful guys—boy, did you get lucky! Now we sit on the precipice of this big change and you can take another shot at it. Go for it!

You who are my age and older—help me become fathers and mentors, coaches and co-learners for young leaders. Being thoroughly immersed in the information age, they need interpreters and evaluators—people to show them that things aren't value-neutral. They need people to help shape the information that they have, to sift it. They need wisdom.

And every young person, I want to say to you, "Lead on." I free you in the name of Christ—just like Chuck Smith and John Wimber freed me as a nineteen-year-old kid. And I want to say to you, "Teach us what you intuitively know." My commitment to you, as your brother, is that when you fall, I'll help you fall forward.

*Todd Hunter began working with the Vineyard in 1979 when he and his wife, Debbie, served a six-month internship under John Wimber. Later that year they packed their bags, moved to Wheeling, West Virginia, and planted their first church. In the 20 years since then, Todd has been involved in church planting and leadership development at various levels. He is now the National Director of the U.S. Association of Vineyard Churches, and lives with his family in Orange County, California.*

### ***What I'm reading these days:***

Divine Conspiracy by Dallas Willard; Missional Church by Darrell Guder; Finding Faith by Brian McLaren

### ***Best movie I've seen in this year:***

Matrix. (After my teen-age son had carefully explained it to me.)

### ***Favorite magazines:***

Fast Company, Current Thoughts & Trends, and Mars Hill audio tapes. They—and my son—help keep me tuned in.

### ***In another life, I would be:***

Center fielder for the New York Yankees — Batting .340; 45 HRS; 150 RBI

### ***A distinct memory from planting my first church:***

Calling—with great passion and enthusiasm—my initial core team a bunch of little orgasms...when I meant to say little parts of an organism. (I was teaching on Romans 8, not on Dr. Laura's most recent book.)

## WIMBER ON THE CHURCH

Do you know what made John Wimber so ruthlessly unmovable on the one hand yet so winsome on the other? After years of traveling around the country as a church growth consultant with Fuller Seminary, after years of consulting with denominational hierarchies and institutions, John found over and over again that the church was hardly ever in God's hands. It was in the hands of bishops. It was in the hands of pastors, deacons, elders, boards. It was in the hands of almost anybody but God. John just simply said, "I'm going to go home and I'm going to start a church in which the Holy Spirit is the leader." In a "Godward" church, in the church I would build, the Holy Spirit would be the leader, the administrator, and the architect. You may remember that John Wimber's very first renewal messages in the early 80's in South Africa and England were entitled, "I Want My Church Back." That was his way of reflecting on what he had seen through his years of consulting. I don't know how many times I heard both John and Carol say, privately and publicly, "When does God get what he wants out of his church?" This is a driving question for me: How can I do everything possible to see that God gets what he wants out of the Vineyard?

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Here are three questions I've learned from Dallas Willard which I would commend to your thinking as you evaluate the church you would build:

1. Does the Gospel that I preach and teach have a natural tendency to cause people who hear it to become full-time students of Jesus?
2. If I look at the programs I lead and all the sermons I preach, would those who believe what I'm saying become Jesus' apprentices as a natural next step?
3. What can I reasonably expect if people actually believe what I preach week in and week out? Systems-thinking from the business world tells us that your system is perfectly designed to give you the results you are now getting. So if you don't like the disciples you're now making—it might be time to re-think your system.