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community
the challenge for church in a secular culture



FROM THE EDITOR

an update on life behind-the-scenes at the magazine



As this issue goes to press, it amazes us to realize that we've now begun our eighth year publishing *Cutting Edge*. The magazine continues to grow far beyond what we ever anticipated, going to tens of thousands of ministry leaders throughout the United States and 43 different countries. A separate European edition of the magazine is now published in Great Britain, and a Spanish-language edition is presently in the works, as well.

Cindy Nicholson, our amazing administrator, continues to play a significant role in making this magazine happen, in addition to her ongoing responsibilities aiding Vineyard church planters across America. Patrick Crawford, our multi-talented graphic designer and photographer—and an associate pastor at the Blue Route Vineyard outside Philadelphia, PA— continues to win rave reviews for his design of *Cutting Edge*. And, of course, Steve Nicholson, as the national director of church planting for Vineyard USA, brings his wisdom and years of experience to bear on the magazine's overall direction.

There has been one change, however. The editing of *Cutting Edge*, which I have overseen since the magazine's inception, will now take place in Cambridge, England. Having finished graduate studies at Duke University, I begin Ph.D. work at Cambridge University this autumn (where my research will focus on theology, politics, and social ethics). And on a more personal note, geography hasn't been the only change for us: Wade Robert Bailey was born to Alicia and me this past March. His happy chatter now fills our tiny Victorian flat near the town centre, and we feel enormously blessed.

Despite these changes, however, I will continue to edit *Cutting Edge*. (High-speed internet really does make the world a smaller place.) Our hope is that we will continue to strike the right balance with what's covered in these pages—a mix of solid counsel, fresh thinking, cultural awareness, theological engagement, and a range of perspectives of what it is to be God's church. Our original mission has not changed: we remain deeply committed to helping church planters pioneer new churches, and to encouraging church leaders in their efforts to embody God's kingdom.

If our email is any indication, we continue to hit the right notes with what we're doing—but we take nothing for granted! We always appreciate your feedback on any level: what was helpful, what wasn't, what you liked, what you didn't. Please don't hesitate to let us know what you think.

In this edition, we tackle an issue that has become something of a hot topic in recent years: community. In particular, we've decided to highlight a distinct dilemma regarding that topic which has not been extensively addressed in *Cutting Edge* before—what does it mean to be a faithful community *in a secular culture*?

As is typical, we've enlisted a diverse range of voices to help us think about that question: Alan Wolfe, one of America's most respected public intellectuals, talks with us about his recent work on evangelicals in the United States; Ken Wilson, who pastors the Ann Arbor Vineyard, addresses the particular challenges of building a church on the doorstep of the University of Michigan; and Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, discusses the thinking behind their creative approaches to being a missional community.

Not surprisingly, there are no easy answers here. The approaches discussed within these pages are but a fraction of possible responses for a faithful Church. But we hope, as always, that this issue of *Cutting Edge* stimulates your thinking—and that, in some small ways, you are helped in your own endeavors to build up the community God has placed you in.

—Jeff Bailey, Editor

P.S. Here's a sneak preview of upcoming articles in *Cutting Edge*: we'll be talking with Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Community Church, about their new work with the poor in Africa; with Philip Jenkins, author of *The Next Christendom*, about the worldwide church; and with distinguished church historian Robert Louis Wilken about the centrality of Biblical preaching in the early church.





THE STRUGGLE TO BE CHRISTIANS IN AMERICA

Jeff Bailey interviews Alan Wolfe, Professor of American Politics and Public Policy, Boston College

Alan Wolfe doesn't fit neatly into the usual categories. A self-described secular, Jewish intellectual—widely-respected in the United States for his numerous books and essays on a variety of contemporary issues—he has written provocatively and insightfully about Protestant Christianity in the U.S., particularly evangelicalism. His cover story in the *Atlantic Monthly* (October 2000) entitled “The Opening of the Evangelical Mind”, for example, explored the positive intellectual developments that have occurred in recent years within evangelicalism and higher education.

His recent book has attracted a significant amount of attention, as well—but not from the audience one might have expected. In *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (Free Press, 2003) Wolfe, who is a professor of political science and director of the Boisi Center for Religion and Public Life at Boston College, spends the book's opening pages assuring his more secular, liberal colleagues that, for all their rhetoric of “Biblical authority” and moral absolutes, research shows that evangelicals largely practice an American version of privatized faith that should not be considered a threat to the secular ideals of the wider culture.

He writes in the book, “For all their (often quite legitimate) denunciation of sex and violence in the popular media, evangelicals flourish amidst the celebrity-drenched, lowest-common-denominator, highly sentimentalized world of romance novels, daytime soaps, NASCAR races, and Opry-knockoff music that dominates America's entertainment industry.” In describing the expressive individualism central to American marketing that is now part-

and-parcel of evangelical church life, he notes an interview conducted with one pastor and reflects that, “Religion is [for him] not the *alternative* to such modern ideals as individualism, but a more effective way to *realize* them.”

This, of course, is not necessarily bad news from Wolfe's perspective. He candidly admits that his deepest commitments lie with the American ideals of liberal democracy (ideals that, in a post-Christian society, seem increasingly less hospitable to religiously-grounded public truth claims). The book, therefore, is a carefully researched, extended plea to two groups of people: Wolfe wants evangelicals to realize just how deeply American culture has shaped them—far more so than the distinctives of their faith—and he admonishes them to *celebrate* instead of lament that fact. (He also expresses exasperation with their claims to be “resident aliens”, language Wolfe considers divisive and irresponsible for American citizens, regardless of their religious persuasion.) At the same time, he pleads for greater tolerance of evangelicals from his secular friends—suggesting that when it comes down to how they actually *live*, the lifestyles, concerns, and aspirations of evangelicals are remarkably similar to those of their secular counterparts.

What Wolfe means to be reassuring, however, some evangelicals have taken as an indictment. A recent article in *Christianity Today* suggested that Wolfe says to evangelicals, in essence, “People like me can live with people like you because you do not truly take yourselves seriously.”

Earlier this summer we talked with Alan Wolfe about the book, its reception, and its implications.

Were most of your suspicions about conservative churches confirmed when you started this research?

I didn't come to this book with many preconceptions. As a social scientist, I knew that a great deal of the work that's been done on American religion has been done by religious people, often writing about their own religion. And while that kind of ethnographic research works wonderfully, there is always something of an agenda at work: if a Reform Jew is writing about Judaism, there is an argument going on with Orthodox Jews, for example; the same thing is typically true in the Christian community. So I thought it was a great advantage to come to the topic without those preconceptions. I had no idea what to expect. What I found in places such as Fuller Seminary, or Vineyard churches, was a whole new experience for me.

The book has received a lot of attention in religious circles. Who did you consider your primary audience to be when writing this book?

I think my main audience was secular liberal people who I felt didn't really understand American religion in general, and *especially* didn't understand its evangelical Protestant off-shoots. I expected them to read and engage the book. I *didn't* expect that the Christian community would respond to the book as it has—because it was written by an outsider! But, in fact, the results were the exact opposite of my expectations. The book got a remarkable reception in conservative religious quarters, and was taken seriously almost everywhere—by Chuck Colson, by Cal Thomas who devoted a “Must Read” column to it, by *Christianity Today* magazine.

Your thesis is meant, it appears, to be reassuring to your secular counterparts—but your conclusions might be taken by evangelicals as something of an indictment. Is that what you found?

I did get that reaction in the more conservative quarters. But one of the things I discovered in my work—which I don't think many of my liberal secular readers know—is that not all conservative Christians are the same. Some are more conservative than others. Generally speaking, the *more* conservative people were the ones who actually liked the book a lot, because they saw it as an indictment of their evangelical co-religionists, who from their point of view had sold out to the culture. I wasn't the first to say this; others in the religious world said it before me.

I relied, for example, on a book by Marva Dawn published by Eerdmans; she said the same thing in some ways. But here I was an *outsider* and, in an odd way, I think my “outsider status” gave my critique more legitimacy. Or, to put it more bluntly, to have a secular Jewish intellectual backing up your case is pretty good!

On the other hand, within the more modern evangelical community, magazines like *Books & Culture* were genuinely pleased that I was interested enough in them and in their world to engage them.

And they didn't take your conclusions as indicting?

Well, they're not necessarily an indictment! I try to make it clear in the book that if you are an evangelical and are committed to the Great Commission, you do have to take the world “as it is”, and you are faced with a very, very difficult dilemma of rejecting the world as it is in favor of some kind of purity of faith, but losing people with whom you want to share the Good News. If you have a commitment to really sharing the gospel, it means that you have to engage the culture. So I don't think it's an indictment so much as an expression of a dilemma, one that has been built into the evangelical world for a long time.

When one looks at research regarding the behavior of evangelicals, it doesn't appear that there is much difference between them and their non-religious counterparts. Is there anything that does stand out as distinctly different?

Well, they talk about God. *That's* something non-religious people generally don't do. But my point was that the level of difference between religious and secular people is not of a sort that should lead to the mutual distrust and antagonism that often exists.

Just to take one little example—not something I stress in the book—many of the secular readers I had hoped to attract are quintessential members of the ACLU or Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. They are very worried about religion playing too much of a role in government. They generally don't know that many evangelical faiths are similarly concerned. Different motives are at work, but that doesn't mean they cannot agree, for example, that when Judge Moore put a

2,000 pound statue of the Ten Commandments in his courtroom there would be a lot of evangelicals who would be upset about that. In fact, the National Association of Evangelicals *was* upset about that. So if one of my more secular readers picks up a newspaper and read that the NAE is upset with Judge Moore, they would be likely to scratch their heads and say, “I don't understand that.” I would hope to provide a framework for understanding why that might be possible.

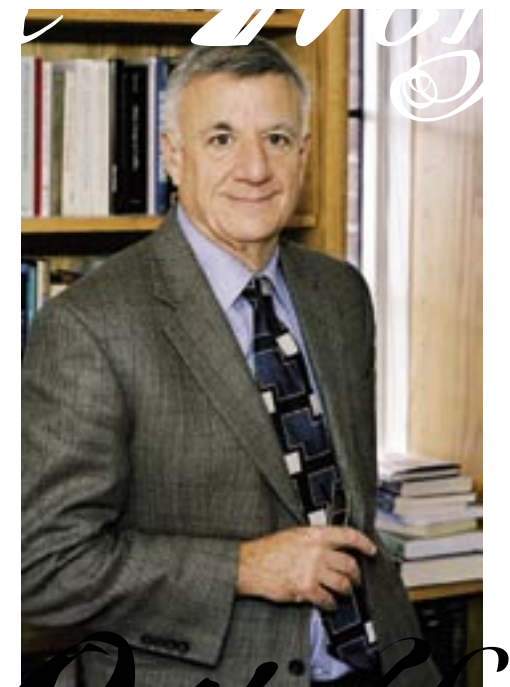
You suggest that the historically mainline denominations are arguably now more counter-cultural than evangelicals. It is usually thought of as the other way around.

It depends on what you mean by “the culture”. If you define the culture in terms of *popular* culture, which is the essence of American culture—and I think in any democratic society it is—then it's the mainline churches that are really counter-cultural because they are standing against many of the trends of the popular culture.

Can you give us an example?

Mass audiences, emotional appeals, a confessional culture. The mainlines stand for a more intellectual approach to religion that I think runs strongly counter to the emotionalism of the wider culture. If you see the culture as a kind of Oprah Winfrey-like confessional culture

continued on pg 20



Alan Wolfe



incarnating jesus-brand spirituality

TRUE BLUE VINEYARD

Jim Pool interviews Ken Wilson, Ann Arbor (MI) Vineyard

“I’m building the kind of church that I would want to attend.” This is Ken Wilson’s simple explanation for what characterizes the Ann Arbor Vineyard, a church sitting in the heart of one of the Midwest’s cultural centers (and home to one of the nation’s top public universities, the University of Michigan).

The church’s sense of identification with the city is clear in even the smallest of ways. The headquarters of the Ann Arbor Vineyard—a non-descript building that formerly housed a local roller rink and civic theater—still has the old roller-rink logo along one of its hallways: “Ann Arbor Skate Club and Coaching Staff.” It acts as a constant reminder that the church isn’t some all-purpose franchise that might just as easily function anywhere else; rather, it’s a community of people called to a particular *place*, a certain locale, in which they are learning to embody Jesus together.

And Jesus, it appears, is keeping busy. The church serves a monthly gourmet meal to 100 single moms and kids, while helping them with their homes, their cars, and their groceries in the weeks in-between. They’ve formed a long-term, cross-racial partnership with a church in a neighboring town. And alongside developing such outreach, many in the church have been working to develop their inward life, too—learning to pray the liturgical hours, for example, as well as engaging more deeply with the disciplines of silence and solitude. (Ken will begin training as a spiritual director at a nearby Jesuit retreat center

this fall.) Not surprisingly, as a church connected to the rhythms of academic life in a university town, roughly half of the church’s visitors are unchurched and between the ages of 18 and 34.

The Ann Arbor Vineyard has its roots in the Catholic-Ecumenical Community movement. The small congregation left that group in 1990 and, under Ken’s leadership, adopted into the Vineyard in 1994. Since then the church has grown substantially, with a weekly attendance of nearly 700, and has planted a church of 150 in Milan, a nearby town. (A second church plant is about to be launched, and a third is already in the planning stages.) Ken also co-authored, with Columbus Vineyard pastor Rich Nathan, the book *Empowered Evangelicals* (Vine Books, 1995).

Recently Ken talked with us about the church and the vision they’ve had for the city. Upon entering the former roller rink, the bustling noises from metro Ann Arbor fade and one surveys a colorful, artsy lounge—radically different from the building’s subdued, humble exterior—that would be the envy of any coffee shop. The church foyer is an inviting gathering space, with comfy couches, café tables, and walls filled with funky art from a local artist who attends the church. Ken’s office—right at the front—announces his availability, and his manner is relaxed and affable while talking about what it looks like to be a church living out a thoughtful, engaged life of faith.

What sorts of things led to the Ann Arbor Vineyard becoming the kind of church that it is today?

A lot of it is about what John Wimber used to talk about: putting together a church that you yourself would want to go to! The Ann Arbor Vineyard is that kind of church for me. When you pass the age of fifty, you begin to realize you are pretty much stuck with who you are, and you are done trying other models. So this church reflects who I am: a child of parents who were part of the Young Socialist Workers League in the late thirties, with a dad who belonged to the NAACP right before the war. I have always had latent liberal leanings politically!

How important is that kind of orientation to leading a church in Ann Arbor?

The typical Ann Arborite values education, leans left politically, and is environmentally concerned. Michigan has long been something of a hotbed of radicalism, actually. When I went to school here, we had the Black Action Movement and were known for having teach-ins on the college campus. Tom Hayden and the Students for a Democratic

Society started its early years here. John F. Kennedy did his Peace Corps speech on the steps of the Michigan Union.

But I think that large segments of Ann Arbor haven’t been reached by evangelicals at all. So much of the straight “evangelical culture” is a turn-off for an Ann Arborite—even those things we think of as “wildly contemporary”. People around here see “contemporary worship” with a rock ‘n’ roll band and associate it with Benny Hinn and the stuff on cable TV. There is a lot of cynicism about standard charismatic forms of worship in Ann Arbor—more than there is in, say, Milan, where we planted a church only a few miles away. There, Vineyard worship is cool and different.

Ann Arbor also has a strong social conscience, although liberalism here has reached a certain point of bankruptcy and reassessment. But that makes it a great time for us as a church to come in and play some different notes.

You have mentioned in the past that humility is the key to reaching the heart of Ann Arbor.

We’ve always felt that a downside of Ann Arbor’s strengths is a certain arrogance. So as a church, we are pretty conscious about trying to come in low, under the radar screen. There’s an “otherness” to God’s kingdom that Ann Arborites, when they encounter it, sniff out as different and are drawn to it. But primarily we try to cultivate humility for the sake of our *own* souls. If you are going to be a Christ-follower in Ann Arbor—especially if you are going to be reaching out—there is a danger of falling into arrogance and intellectualism.

Today’s evangelical mindset seems to play to a certain confidence—coming out of the “Christian ghetto” and assertively “taking our place” in the wider culture. How does an attitude of humility fit with that?

Sometimes, unfortunately, it’s contrary to it. For instance, Ann Arbor had a take-over by conservatives on the school board years ago. They mobilized people on the grass-roots level and took control of the school board. Most Ann Arborites saw it as a power grab—and it was. So is that how the followers of Jesus should be viewed in Ann Arbor: if they can make a grab for power, they will do it, and if they can organize better than their opponents, they will? I think it’s really important for the church in Ann Arbor to *not* meet those expectations.

Is it possible to model a different way of approaching things among churches?

Evangelicals around here are more known for what they oppose (like abortion and gay marriage) than what they’re for. But if the evangelical churches in this city got together and focused instead on creating a ministry to single moms, or black-white partnerships, I think it would change the perception of the Church in Ann Arbor in very short order. So I’m frustrated with the limited issues evangelicals and charismatics get concerned with.

Evangelicals in a secular town have a great temptation to circle the wagons because secularism is sharp and aggressive sometimes. But truthfully, we can *afford* to be gracious. We can *afford* to be merciful. We can critique secular culture with sharp and cogent arguments rather than just attack it. I like Ann Arbor, liberalism and all, but I’ve lived here thirty years, and that’s been enough time to cycle through periods of being irritated by its secularism and periods of enjoying its quirkiness. A problem with evangelicals is that we often don’t stay in one place long enough to work out a



relationship with that place—enabling us to see what’s best in it, affirm what’s good in it, yet also have a platform for critiquing its deficits.

I have a feeling that going in the direction of mercy, grace, and tangible investment in the city where you live is not only refreshing for the community looking at the church, but it is also refreshing for second-generation evangelicals and others who are chafing at some of the cultural expressions of evangelicalism. They are tired of the “Christ against culture” church environment. They’d like to see what a “Christ transforming culture” environment might be like. We don’t have to change the church culture that much to do it. Nor do we have to give up on key moral issues. But we don’t have to let a certain, narrow range of issues become “touchstone”, up-front, welcome-defining issues, either.

How does alertness to a wider range of issues affect the way your church community looks?

I think it’s possible for the Holy Spirit to do stuff that has been defined by others as impossible. The head of our men’s ministry is an activist in the Democratic Party. Some evangelicals are going to have to make their peace with the concept that that’s possible, or that perhaps it’s not a sin to have voted for Bill Clinton!

Given the way Christianity is often portrayed, it’s hard for those in Ann Arbor to become Christians. It’s harder still if they are told that they have to buy into “young earth” creationism, for example, or vote straight Republican. I used to give talks critiquing secularism. In thirty years I never had one person come up to me afterward and say, “You just nailed it, Ken. You’re right, I’m wrong.” That stuff is only effective with already-evangelical kids nervously headed off to secular universities.

You’ve talked in other contexts about “the unique challenge of winning secular people to the inspiration of Scripture.” How would you describe that challenge?

Our standard evangelical response to the challenge of winning secular people is to get your doctrine of the Bible clear: that it’s infallible, inerrant,

etc. But that doesn’t mean anything to the person outside the Christian community! Their concern is, “Is there any power in this? Will this help me? Can I encounter God in the Bible?” This may be one of the places where the differentiations people have made between modernists and post-modernists are especially valid. In the older model, if you could establish that the Bible is the Word of God, people would be willing to build on that and go from there. But of course, that’s not really how most people come to faith. I came to faith not by first believing in the inerrancy of the Bible but by having a need, and having a friend who was following Jesus.

Along the way we need to be sensitive to the roadblocks that might get thrown up for people. Take evolution as an example. If Christians make “young-earth creationism” a boundary marker for orthodox Christian faith, they are placing an enormous barrier to the gospel for scientists and other thoughtful people seeking Christ. I’ve found that simply by letting people know that I personally don’t adopt a young-earth creationist perspective, and that Christians have many views about how God created the universe, and that there are various ways to read the first few chapters of Genesis, this barrier to faith is lifted. I also point out that this is not an issue that Christians in places other than North America are much vexed over. I’m always looking for ways for people to encounter God. So just making assertions about the authority of the Bible doesn’t do much for secular people these days. Expressing love for it, talking about how it has affected your life, how it’s helped you encounter God—that’s different.

One of the big things you talk about at your church is “Jesus-brand spirituality.” How did that description come about?

The one question that we were having trouble adequately answering in our “Introduction to the Vineyard” class at the church was, “How do I describe Vineyard to my friends?” We sat down and tried to brainstorm ways to do that. Some people suggested “small groups,” or “contemporary worship”. But those are *church* words. Just recently someone I knew was at Borders Bookstore, ran

into an unchurched friend, and they started talking about church. She described how we did things as “Jesus-brand spirituality”—and ever since we’ve found that to be a very helpful description. The word “spirituality” is one that people understand in Ann Arbor. But “*Jesus-brand*” is specific, not generic, and implies a certain content. So it actually says something about us that an unchurched person can understand.

An Ann Arborite would recognize what this is.

The charismatic movement here has lost its voice in the culture because of some of the cultural baggage. In the sixties and early seventies—when the charismatic movement was strong here among the Baby Boomers—charismatic was cool, expressive, fitting right in with the culture. But in today’s culture, charismatic behavior gets stereotyped as part of conservative Christianity. Talking about Jesus, on the other hand, is a different matter.

We talk about being a church that is both active and contemplative. Active means simply “doing the stuff”—praying for the sick, feeding the poor, pursuing social justice. We don’t frame it as “Word and Spirit”. You *could* do it that way. But John Wimber’s approach is rooted in Quakerism, and his big contributions to Holy Spirit ministry were all about “dialing down”, being quiet, silence, listening. That frames the contemplative side in words the Ann Arborite can understand and appreciate.

And the active side relates to the kingdom agenda that Jesus talked about.

Outward-focused, active in the community, bringing the Gospel out beyond the church walls, praying for the sick, serving the poor. We try to keep the balance, working at the same time to develop the inner lives of believers, equipping them with the skills they need to recharge their batteries spiritually so they don’t burn out. I personally think that stillness, silence and solitude are the spiritual disciplines for our time. That completely resonates with secular people. In other eras, of course, silence and solitude were built-in. But today we have TV and the computer. Those

disciplines, however, haven’t been much of an emphasis in the charismatic world.

What are you doing to encourage that contemplative life in your church?

Mainly we are continuing to stir the pot on the subject. A running joke from the pulpit is when I say, “Have I mentioned The Divine Hours?” I run six-week start-up groups for people who want to get started trying out this discipline. It is a Divine Hours Support Group! We spend 25 minutes before the Sunday morning service, with six or eight people. I discuss what praying the Offices are all about, how to get it started, how to think about it, and then we model it for six weeks. I’ve prayed the hours daily for the past two years. Some small group leaders have picked it up and it’s starting to filter out through the church community. It won’t work for everybody, of course. When I teach these groups I talk a little bit about silence and stillness—what’s the value of it, how to incorporate it. I would love to get morning prayers going here seven days a week.

As in, “Show up, we’ll be here at the church each morning praying, regardless?”

Right. I’m working on it, modeling it, talking about it, getting other leaders doing it, putting some of the mentoring online on our website. As people come through Alpha and want to pursue Jesus, they begin asking how to get started praying, and this is a good tool. Everyone on staff knows that if you want to help people get started praying, the Divine Hours can help give it a structure.

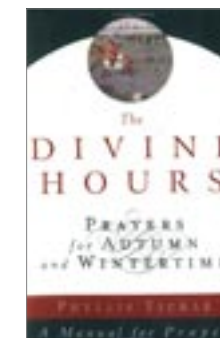
We’re trying to pray more together as a church. But it’s hard. Just praying the Lord’s Prayer together on a Sunday morning is a minefield! You have ex-Catholics who are used to praying through it really fast; you have evangelicals who are suspicious of praying anything at *all* together; plus, people have learned four or five different versions. Just getting the Power Point person to put the one you want to use up on the screen is an adventure.

I would imagine that the strength of Jesus-brand spirituality is that it really authenticates the Gospel within the secular community of Ann Arbor.

It does. We started a compassion ministry down in Milan, and that was a totally authenticating structure for the Gospel for everybody—not just for Ann Arborites, but for us, too. It became one of the main things people in the community would tell

FIXED-HOUR PRAYER?

“In the evening, in the morning, and at noonday, I will complain and lament, and the LORD will hear my voice.”



Are you asking yourself, “What in the world are the ‘Divine Hours’?”

You wouldn’t be alone in asking this question. Praying “the Hours” (alternatively known as “fixed-hour prayer”) is a long-standing practice

that has fallen into disuse in contemporary times, especially among evangelicals. Fixed-hour prayer is essentially a means of spiritual formation: for learning to pray, for remaining connected with God throughout the day, and for having one’s life shaped by the language of Scripture and the historical Church. It is a way of praying that is in direct continuity with the way the Jews have prayed for thousands of years—and it is how Jesus, his disciples, and the early church prayed, as well. Indeed, praying regular, scripted, Biblically-rooted prayers at specific times throughout the day was as standard a practice for Jews and early Christians as regular eating and drinking—something routine and assumed, not considered an extra “duty”. It was what any observant follower of Yahweh just *did*. The reasons for its decreased observance are a complex mix of historical factors. Still, it has never failed to be practiced by various traditions of the church across time. And its observance in recent years is now being increasingly recovered across the Church.

How does it work? Most contemporary prayer books have coalesced the various “offices” into four periods—morning, noon, evening and night. These hours are not precisely “fixed”, as there is a range of time allowed for each office, to accommodate modern schedules. Generally, each office involves some psalms, a brief Scriptural reading, the Lord’s Prayer, and scripted prayers. The key is to enter into each session thoughtfully, reflectively, trying to make the words your own. Realize, however, that it will take time to become familiar with the practice, so don’t force it or feel like you’re not “getting it” or nothing is “happening”. As Ken Wilson notes, “Start where you feel the neediest. For me, it was mid-day on those days at work to help me from feeling overwhelmed by everything

needing to be done—to remember that there is, in fact, a God, and that everything is in God’s hands. For you, it might be the need to start the day with God and you’ve failed miserably at the devotional practices you’ve tried. Or maybe you and your spouse have not been able to think about praying together, so you might want to try doing the night prayer together.” The prayers can take as little as 10 minutes, or longer if you wish. You might try to find at least one other person who has experience with praying the Hours—or who is at least *interested* in experimenting with them—so that you can learn together.

Perhaps the single-best prayer book currently available is the recently-released three volume set by Phyllis Tickle entitled, *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Wintertime* (Doubleday). (You can read an interview with Phyllis—the former religion editor for *Publisher’s Weekly*—in the Winter 2001 issue of *Cutting Edge*.) One of the most accessible introductions to fixed-hour prayer is found at the Ann Arbor Vineyard’s website (www.annarborvineyard.org), which includes extensive, practical Questions & Answers with Phyllis Tickle, as well as an on-line version of the Hours. (Note: Phyllis will be speaking at the Ann Arbor Vineyard weekend church services February 12-13, 2005.)

—Jim Pool

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

The Divine Hours: Prayers for Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Wintertime (Doubleday, 2000)

By Phyllis Tickle





Jesus Brand Community

THE PROMISE, PITFALLS AND PURSUIT OF JESUS-BRAND COMMUNITY

By Ken Wilson



As the bonds of community have increasingly disappeared from American life, churches find the creating and sustaining of community an increasing challenge, as well. As a follow-up to the interview with Ken Wilson, we've included an adapted talk given by Ken earlier this year, which he presented at a plenary session of the 2004 Vineyard USA Great Lakes Regional conference. Those seeking to increase and deepen their community will find what follows to be especially perceptive in both its diagnosis and counsel. (Ken Wilson and children at left.)

Community

There is a wonderful book written by Robert Putnam called *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam is a professor of public policy at Harvard University. Putnam's thesis, backed by immense sociological data, is that "social capital"—what we might call community in various forms, whether they be political parties, clubs, PTA groups, bowling leagues, bridge clubs—all of these structures for social capital have nose-dived since the 1960s. The statistics suggest that this decline in social capital crosses all sorts of barriers—age, socio-economics, gender, and race. What began with the Baby Boom has grown worse with each succeeding generation—so that Generation X has less social capital than those of us who are Boomers, and so on.

This has some very powerful and important implications for us. First, this itch for community that we're hearing about, especially among younger people, will need scratching for some time. The fact that younger pastors in the Vineyard are talking a lot more about community than those who are older has a good reason behind it: they have experienced less social capital in their lives than we Boomers have!

A Generational Hunger

I grew up in the 1950s. If you were a psychiatrist you would say that I grew up in a fairly dysfunctional family, on all kinds of levels. But even growing up in a dysfunctional family, *we had dinner together every single night*. My mother made a dessert every night. I walked home from school at lunchtime each day to a lunch of Campbell's soup and tuna sandwich wrapped in waxed paper, followed by a hug and a kiss from my mom before I headed back into the jungles of elementary school. Today's generations largely know nothing of that.

So this itch will need scratching for some time. It is a form of thirst that is symptomatic of drought. Community is not just the latest "buzz" from [Vineyard USA National Director] Bert Waggoner; this is not the latest way for younger Vineyard pastors to differentiate themselves from the massive Baby Boom generation that precedes them. This is *reality* striking. It is not going to go away quickly.

Furthermore, we need to recognize that Vineyard churches tend to reach a population who are the *most* impoverished in social capital. The oldest people in our churches are Baby Boomers, for the

most part—and as you go down the generational line the social capital only decreases. So we have a special call to reach these people who are impoverished in community.

A Lonely Culture

I went to Kashmir a few years back to visit a little Anglican church that we have a partnership with. This church is quietly reaching a lot of local Kashmiris with the gospel for the first time. Not surprisingly, there is a lot of economic poverty in that place. But as I spent more time with them, I became very envious of their social capital, especially among the men. They have deep friendships; they spent time drinking tea together, conversing with one another, stopping over at one another's homes. They are rich in *social* capital.

Our culture knows that this has to change. Bill Clinton's administration, whatever you think of it, was powerfully influenced by Putnam's book. Clinton understood that most programs will fail unless we are able to recover the sense of community with each other. The U.S. Center for Disease Control maintains statistics on things like suicide rates, depression rates, and what they label "malaise"—symptoms like headaches, insomnia and G-type distresses which don't have any evident causes. All of these things have directly related to the decline in social capital. Interestingly, Putnam's five-point solution to this problem actually called for a spiritual awakening in the United States! He pointed to the Great Awakening of the Revolutionary War era and the Second Great Awakening of the Civil War era as religious movements that reversed a declining trend in social capital. I don't know Putnam to be a man of deep religious beliefs, but he says that if the United States is going to turn this around, we are going to have to have a spiritual awakening.

The Example of the Early Christians

Hunger for community, of course, is a sweet spot for the gospel. You know that in the early church of the second and third centuries there were massive plagues that struck the Roman Empire. One of the reasons historians suggest the early church grew as fast as it did was that within the Jesus community people loved one another and nursed their sick, whereas among the surrounding pagans the death rates were so high that they would just leave the sick alone. The outward-focused people of the Jesus community would go to their pagan neighbors who were abandoned by their loved ones, and would nurse them. And those

pagans who had been nursed back to health would become Christians. Therefore the gospel wasn't left to rot in a Christian ghetto, but it went out into the community. So the combination of the plagues and the love of the Christian community created a sweet spot for the gospel.

I think we are at a similar place for the gospel in America right now. We are primed to make a difference. Putnam's follow-up book (*Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, Simon & Schuster 2003) identifies Rick Warren's Saddleback Community Church as one of the promising trends in restoring social capital. Interestingly, Putnam has a very high view of mega-churches, and says that they are one of the forces in the United States that is actually doing something to restore social capital. He calls the pastors of mega-churches "savvy social capitalists".

The *form* of community, however, that we have to offer is *Jesus-brand* community rather than generic community. It would be very tempting for us in this age, with such a loss of community, to feel like "Gee, the solution is community, so let's just throw community at people." But what we have to offer is particular, not general.

Marks of Jesus-Brand Community

Jesus-brand community has several characteristics. First of all, it is community *in* Christ. Community, strictly speaking, is not something that we can "create". It's not something that we can even build theologically. *It already exists in Christ*. When you read New Testament epistles like I John, for example, it paints this picture of a pre-existing community—the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Father, and all of us being invited into the love of God, into the place where God is in community already. We step into the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit—into the love of a bigger family. It is all of a piece because the love of God is a place where God is in relationship with Himself and with us.

It's also community *from* Christ. It's a gift that we receive. We have no right to it. We can't make demands for community; we can only receive it from Christ. The early Christians, like many of us today, had a spotty experience of Jesus-brand community.

Yes, there was the headquarters in Jerusalem where they had 3,000 coming to Christ in one day and they even lived common-purse for a time. But



*Love community and you will kill it
Love your brother and you will build it*

that was exceptional; it's never mentioned again in the book of Acts. You have examples of intensive, big communities on the one hand, but many of the Jesus communities in the New Testament were simply little church planting outposts in a sea of paganism. It's estimated that the early church at AD 100 was maybe 8,000 people, and that by AD 150 it had grown to 40,000. Today there are 20,000 people in just *Vineyard* churches in Central Ohio! That's half as many Christians as there were in 150 AD in the whole world. So the experience of community wasn't just this idyllic thing; it was spotty in many different places.

Finally, Jesus-brand community is community for Christ. This is the most important thing about it. Ultimately, community is not for us—it is for God and for God's purposes. It would be nice for us—and a great temptation!—to form cozy little communities of the like-minded. But that would not be Jesus-brand community. In order to engage with and participate in the reality of community, we have to surrender our demand that community meet our needs. It's only when we yield our rights that we really experience and taste the reality of community.

Along the way, we'll discover that community is not truly for Christ unless it is leaning toward the lost and the poor. We need to lean toward the lost, because our natural tendency is to lean toward those who think of themselves as "found". And we need to lean toward the poor because our natural tendency is to lean toward the wealthy. Of course the gospel is for down-and-outers as well as up-and-outers, but we have to correct for our natural tendencies.

The Pitfalls of Community

I like to talk about the pitfalls of community because I consider myself an expert. Let me tell you a little about my wife Nancy's and my quest

for community. We are veterans of what is known as the Catholic Charismatic Ecumenical Covenant Community Movement. We participated in this from 1973 to 1990. In this movement, we were driven by the pursuit of community as an ideal to be achieved. And we did pretty well: in the city of Ann Arbor, which at the time had about 100,000 people, we had a community of 3,000 people—1,500 adults and 1,500 children. These Catholics actually practiced *humana vitae*, which resulted in a very high fertility rate! Probably 95% of the adults in the community were in small groups. Probably 90% had regular meetings with a pastoral leader—sometimes weekly or bi-weekly. We had the best tithing rate I've ever seen in any community. At least 80% of the adults tithed, most of them on their gross income. That's with 60% of the adults in the community being Catholics who had never even heard the word "tithing"!

Between 1975 and 1990, 60 different single people lived with me, my wife, and our kids, for at least a year at a time. Our third-born daughter, Amy, was born into a household with me, my wife, two siblings, four single men, four single women, a dog and a fish. During ten of those years we lived on a "common purse", which meant that all the people in our household pooled their incomes and we all lived from the shared offering. I was mentored spiritually throughout that period, and in turn mentored many others.

In 1990, there was a very serious shake-up of the community, as there were in most of the authority-driven movements of the 1970s and 1980s. All those movements went through a real crunch time, an implosion. I was in leadership in the community at that time. When all was said and done, there were two little groups left (who were in conflict with each other), and each had 100-150 members. That is a precipitous decline in social capital in just a one-year period. It was an extremely painful experience to go through as a leader.

Learning True Community

Our little group adopted into the Vineyard in 1994 as a church of 150, and we've now grown to about 700. We recently planted a church in the rural town of Milan a few miles away. Our church in Ann Arbor attracts a lot of unchurched young people. We have about 40 small groups in the Ann Arbor Vineyard. When we took the NCD test a few years ago, our highest scores were in loving relationships. I felt great about that until I saw that our low score was empowering leadership, and I realized that loving relationship was pretty much my wife's doing, and empowering leadership, our minimum factor, was pretty much mine.

So for the last thirty years, my life has been about exploring, experiencing, and learning about the promise and the pitfalls of community. I bear in my body the marks of community! I have concluded at this point that the most dangerous enemy of Jesus-brand community is viewing community as an ideal to be achieved rather than as a gift to be received. Everything you need to know about avoiding the pitfalls of community is found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *Life Together*. Chapter One alone mapped out, almost sentence by sentence, my experience in covenant community. Bonhoeffer says, "Love community and you will kill it. Love your brother and you will build it."

The Dangers of the Ideal

By "love community," I think what he meant was "love the *ideal* of community." In a culture that is starved for community, it is easy to view community in idealized terms, to form an image of community in one's mind and then strive to achieve it. If you are a twenty-something, the ideal of community is something like a Christianized version of the TV show *Friends*. It's easy, when community is an ideal, to be dissatisfied with what one calls, rather dismissively, "church" and long

for an ideal that has not yet been realized, and to call that ideal "community". So a person might say, I want to experience something more than just church life—I want to experience *community*, which is "church + something": church + long-term small groups, or church + neighborhood groupings or church + some higher level of commitment with the "really core" people, so you have your church members but then you have your *community* members. Bonhoeffer warns against that way of thinking. He says it is *all* community; anything that is from Christ is community. It may be a little bit of community or a lot of community—but there is not some threshold over which it stops being "church" and starts being "community". If we receive Jesus, we receive the beginning of community.

If we view community as an ideal to be achieved, we see people differently. "These people are not the building materials I need to build my ideal community. They're too young, too old, too single, too married, too busy, too underemployed, too lost, too found." I remember when we were first transitioning our church into a Vineyard; we needed to start a small group, so Nancy and I decided we would lead the first one. It was like an invitation-only kinship with a lot of young couples—the cool people—because this was going to be the "DNA foundational small group" of the church. Besides, I wanted to surround myself with beautiful people!

Then a woman named Gloria called asking to come to the small group. She lived with severe handicaps and used a wheelchair, and was married to a severely schizophrenic guy who smoked like a chimney and reeked of cigarette smoke. I've since learned that schizophrenia is *one* thing that nicotine has a positive effect on. She was asking if our house was wheelchair accessible, and I hummed and hawed and suggested that a different kinship near to her might work better. She thanked me and hung up. I went upstairs to brush my teeth to get ready for small group, and I heard just as clear as could be the voice of Jesus in my head saying, "Ken, may I come to your kinship tonight?" Immediately I knew what it was. I said, "Yes, Jesus, I would be delighted if you would come to my kinship and I'm calling Gloria right back and insist that she come." And so Gloria and her husband came, and most weeks I would give Stan one of my new t-shirts and asked him to remove his because the smoke-drenched clothing was getting to other attenders, and we incorporated them into this lovely, lovely community that we had. There is

UNSOLICITED ADVICE FOR THOSE WISHING TO BUILD JESUS-BRAND COMMUNITIES

1. Make a long-term commitment to a local community. Every time we move, we uproot, and that has consequences for community. Think in terms of years and decades when it comes to community, not months. If you've got a four-month plan to increase community in the church, you are not thinking straight.

2. Express gratitude for the gift of community whenever it's possible. Follow the model of Paul, who was constantly opening and closing his letters with thanksgiving for the communities to which he was writing. Thanksgiving is like sun on the soul.

3. Emphasize whole-life, holistic small groups. More and more we are encouraging small groups to have meals together. Sitting around a table having a meal with others is a sign of God's kingdom. It's the banquet feast of the kingdom made flesh. Communion is another great thing to encourage a small group to celebrate together. Have them read N.T. Wright's book, *The Meal Jesus Gave Us*. Some wonderful things happen in that context. Promote care traditions in your small groups, things like hospital visits, meals for families of new babies, help moving, and so on.

4. Remember that your ministry to the poor isn't just throwing resources at poor people; it's building community with them. We have a single moms' ministry that is all about enhancing the experience of community for single moms and their kids, and it's powerful.

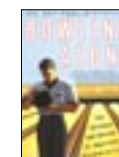
5. Develop a Biblical theology of community. Just like we continue to need to take our worldview blinders of rationalism off so we can embrace the supernatural, we need to take our worldview blinders of *individualism* off when we are reading the Bible. This is one of your primary tasks if you are teaching the Bible. Help people take those blinders off. Do a series on "Redeemed Community in Genesis". It's amazing how that's a major theme. Or a series on the healing ministry of Jesus—and how the healings restored people to *community*.

6. Build on the social capital strengths of women. Women are generally better at this than men, and it is important for women to be involved in leadership for where the church is headed.

7. Spin technology to build social capital. This is one of Robert Putnam's recommendations. The church should be on the forefront of spinning technology to enhance, not reduce, social capital. Use group lists for small groups so they can keep in touch, send out prayer SOS emails, etc. Our church has a video game night once a month at the church, where they link up all the computers and go after each other virtually. It brings out a bunch of men who would never otherwise venture into this context. Our associate pastor works at building connections between those guys, drawing them in as resources for the single-parent families with their computer needs.

—Ken Wilson

RECOMMENDED BOOKS:



Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community
By Robert Putnam (Simon & Schuster, 2001)



Better Together: Restoring the American Community
By Robert Putnam (Simon & Schuster, 2003)



The Meal Jesus Gave Us: Understanding Holy Communion
By N. T. Wright (Westminster John Knox, 2003)



Life Together
By Dietrich Bonhoeffer

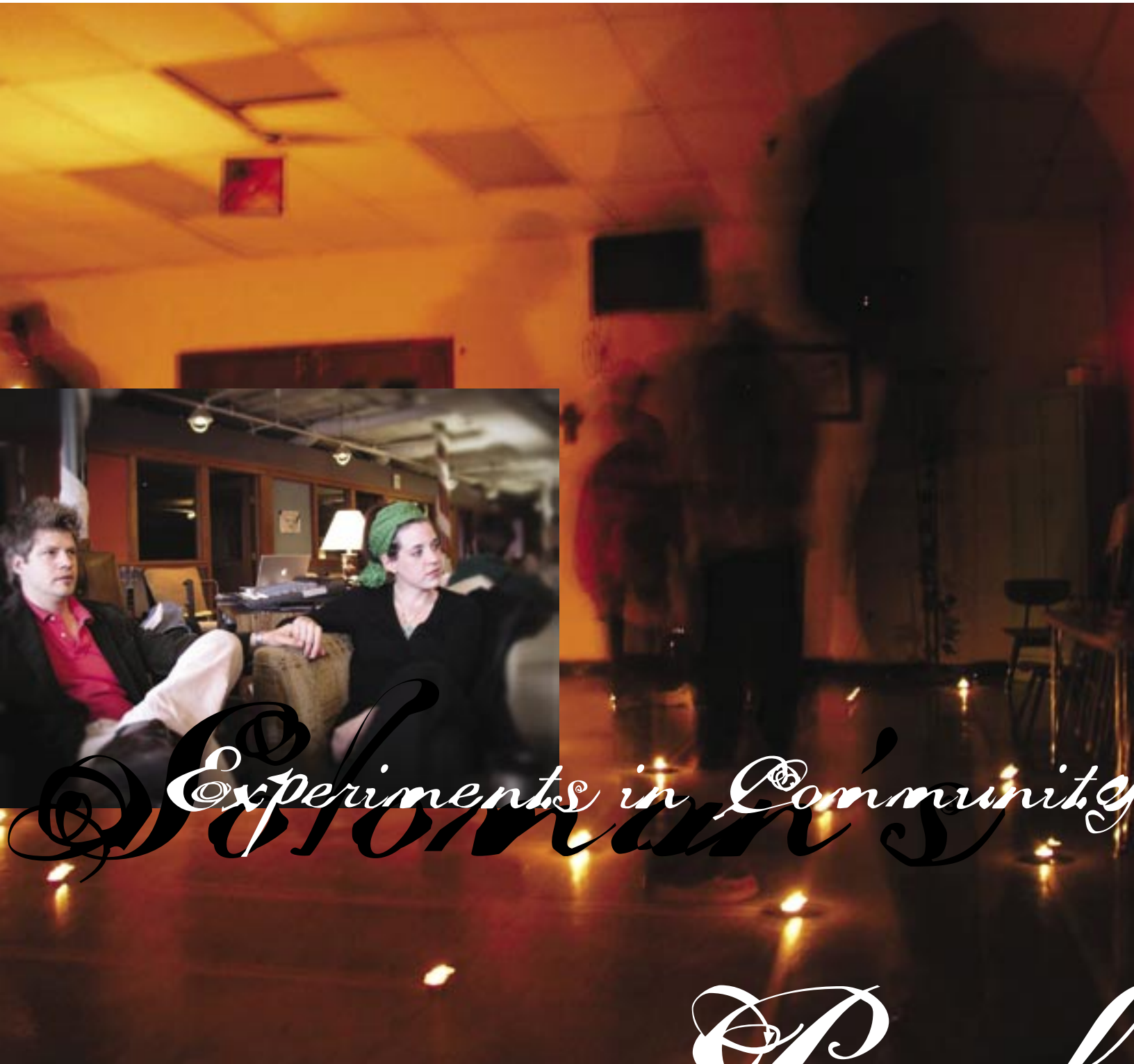
Inside



experiments in community

AN INSIDE LOOK AT SOLOMON'S PORCH

With Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon's Porch, Minneapolis, MN



It's not every church that ends up being featured on the front-page of *The New York Times* (February 18, 2004), or referenced in books as diverse as *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age* (Brazos Press, 2002) or *Living on Purpose: Finding God's Best for Your Life* (Baker, 2001). But, then, Solomon's Porch is not a typical church. The congregation, which was planted five years ago, today numbers 300 and is thoughtfully engaged in what they call "experiments" in being a "holistic, missional, Christian community".

Solomon's Porch meets in a converted 1930s office building in the inner-city Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis, Minnesota. On any given Sunday evening, visitors enter the front door, ascend a candle-lit stairway, and walk through a fabric-draped entrance into a 4,000 square foot, art-house worship space with multicolored walls, paintings, photographs, sculptures, and scores of comfy couches and chairs arranged in the round. (There are, to be exact, thirty-one couches—not counting rocking chairs, arm chairs, recliners, end tables, and coffee tables). The small tables dotting the room are covered with candles and communion elements. There's a stool in the center, a band off to one side, and two screens in far corners of the room. From wherever you sit you can see one of the screens—as well as the faces of other people. There is a sense of warmth and intimacy to the room's arrangement, although the space is deceptively large, and able to accommodate the hundreds who gather every Sunday and at meetings throughout the week.

There is a wide range of ages milling about. The artsy vibe would lead one to expect a preponderance of twenty-something singles—but there are, in fact, a large number of families and children present, and babies seem to be everywhere. The Sunday gathering officially starts at 5:30 p.m.—but the music doesn't begin till 5:40. When asked why the service always starts late, the official answer is, "We're not starting late, we're starting with *conversation*." Conversation is at the heart of a lot of things around here.

The sermon is delivered from a stool in the center. Doug Pagitt, the pastor, preaches without notes, and then moderates an open discussion about

the sermon afterwards (in which any question is fair game). And while Pagitt is an engaging, funny speaker, those listening know that the preparation for the night's sermon actually began as a communal activity earlier that week. Every Tuesday night an open Bible study is held at the church, and the passage for the upcoming Sunday is read, discussed, and wrestled with. Doing theology as a communal practice is important to Solomon's Porch, and the Tuesday night study is an important part of that process.

An overtly communal approach carries over into much of what they do as a church. Each Sunday before the service, they hold a cookout to which their entire neighborhood is invited. There is also a communal meal each Wednesday, which different people in the church host in their homes, with fifty or sixty people typically showing up (in various combinations of families, singles, weekly regulars, and guests). Everyone pitches in with preparation and clean-up. Hospitality is both a central metaphor *and* a concrete practice that undergirds much of life at Solomon's Porch.

Connection to the wider community of the historical church is important, as well. While Solomon's Porch locates itself in the evangelical tradition, creeds and ancient prayers are a regular part of their worship, as is following the Church calendar, anointing with oil, walking the labyrinth, and learning to pray the Stations of the Cross.

The church building sits in a mixed-income, multi-racial neighborhood. The congregation has steadily been building relationships and discovering ways to serve by using their church space to offer free computer use and internet service, to give away food, and to conduct various programs for children in the neighborhood.

Doug Pagitt spent his first ten years of ministry as the youth pastor at Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. He was then the director of Young Leader Network (a part of Leadership Network based in Dallas, Texas) for several years before starting Solomon's Porch. Doug sits on the board of Emergent/Youth Specialties, regularly speaks at national pastors' conferences and recently (along with other members of Solomon's Porch) wrote the book *Reimagining Spiritual*

Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church (Zondervan 2004) which chronicles a typical week in the life of Solomon's Porch. He is presently writing a follow-up to that book, entitled *Preaching Beyond Speech-Making: Practices of a Generous Ecclesiology*.

Recently Doug talked to us about their journey as a church.

I became a Christian when I was seven-teen, with no church background at all. When I was nineteen or twenty I began working in a contemporary mega-church—so innovation, creativity, and thoughtfulness were part of my church experience from early on. Also, evangelism is something that's very important to me, and probably one of my primary spiritual gifts.

What Really Works

When we were first getting started with Solomon's Porch, we instinctively said we didn't want to be anti-this or anti-that. Rather, the eight of us who started things said, "Let's talk about the things that have been most beneficial and useful for us in our lives with God, and let's see if we can help those things become part of our collective experience together. Let's try to structure church life around those kinds of practices." So we were asking everyone to reflect back on their lives and take note of what was really good—not what was disliked—and how we could learn to incorporate those things into our communal life and worship. It's still that way today. We rarely do things simply because we've heard of something other churches are doing or that churches "ought" to do. Our practices are more local and contextual than that.

The practices that we began discovering and experimenting with—practices we began to talk about in categories such as physicality, dialogue, hospitality and service—weren't "categories" for us at the time. I think they emerged out of a deep desire in our community to move beyond the simplicity and reductionism that many of us had experienced in our Christian lives. So our music is a bit more complex; our organizational structure, while pretty flat, is still complex considering the number of people and things going on. "How accessible can we make this?" is not a question we've tended



to ask. We have, ironically, found accessibility has come more through complexity than through simplicity. That may sound a little counter-intuitive. But I think we see that in Scripture, as well as in reflecting on our own experiences in life and education. When we look at the Bible, for example, we see primarily a narrative there—and that narrative is very complex! Not everything fits together very neatly into some system. Of course, in life, once you find out someone's history—their past, how their family came together—you realize that personal history is itself complex. You see this great little Christian family, for example, and then you find out that they were pregnant before they got married and *that's* why they got married! We are fooling ourselves to say, "We are helping people by making everything simple." No, you help people by making the complex realities approachable.

Ad Hoc Structures

Therefore, many of our current structures were birthed out of necessity, and out of recognition of what was already happening. Our Tuesday night Bible discussion group came about because I said, "I am not going to put the sermon together by myself. Some of you are going to help." Someone said, when are we going to do that? "I don't know; Tuesdays are open!" That kind of thing was the norm, not me sitting there asking, "Let's see, what are three strategies for becoming dialogical in our preaching?"

Wednesday night dinners were birthed out of the fact that we wanted to meet more than one time a week. So we said, "How about dinner on Wednesday nights at our house?" After we had a couple of those, we said, "I think we're onto something here." We did this instead of a small group structure in our church, which I had a pretty severe "allergy" to. I knew that whatever Solomon's Porch turned out to be, it was not going to be a church of small groups—because I think they often foster individualistic, self-actualized structures of homogeneity that I have no interest in. I think the small group philosophy—and by that I do *not* mean small groups of people meeting, because we have bunches of those—is that you give preference to a certain size group because you believe that in that size group you can know others and be known by them. Now I think it is really important that we know others and be known by them—but I believe that a big part of community is having to

love those with whom you are not in a *quid pro quo* relationship, where you're not just "meeting needs" of other people just like yourself.

Eclectic Authenticity

When new people come into the church for the first time, several things surprise them. Initially it's the arrangement of our worship space. It's in a circle, it's put together with household furniture, and has a kind of art-house vibe. That sort of funky vibe sets them up to be surprised at the level of thoughtfulness and intensity that there is in the gathering itself. Some are surprised by the level of different traditions that play out in what we do which purposefully connect us to the historical Church and its liturgy. We do Communion every week, and there is a processional that goes with Communion set to our own music. It's an eclectic mix. People who don't like it usually react because they don't find the familiarity that they find other places, and we don't use a lot of words that they are comfortable with, such as certain "religious words" to describe our relationship with God.

A critique we sometimes get is a combination of being too extroverted and interpersonal: You may have to sit on a couch next to somebody you don't know! Furniture is set up in a circle so you are looking at the screen and somebody is looking right at you and over your head at the screen behind you from the other side. The physical intimacy in the way Communion is done and the way we involve people in action with each other freaks some people out. We are intentionally trying to take interpersonal communication techniques and utilize them in group or mass communication settings. So we are absolutely deliberate about that. We give space for people to comment on the sermon afterwards; what if it's the person sitting right next to you who comments? Great, now everybody's looking at you! So you have to have a certain level of comfort with social interaction to make it here. We try to create some little enclaves for people that don't do that very well, but we try not to leave them there for long. At some point if they say, "Solomon's Porch is my place", the expectation is going to come to the surface that they are going to have people over to their house for dinner sometime. It's better to tell them right off the bat that if they join this group of people, access to their life is just par for the course. This isn't a Kiwanis Club.

In some way, this church is sort of an experiment. Bruce Springsteen is quoted as saying that when he is getting ready for a concert, he tells himself two things: "This is the most important thing that I have to do in the world." And the second thing he tells himself is: "It's just rock 'n' roll." I try to think that way about this church, too.

Beyond Small Groups

Five years ago, when Solomon's Porch was just getting started, the pressure was enormous to explain why we were not going to structure ourselves as a church of small groups, why we were going to structure ourselves as a communal expression with multiple means of people connecting with each other. Now, of course, somebody could come in and look and say, "Well, that sure looks like small groups to me!" All I can tell you is that we have never, that I know of, chosen to define the nature of our relationships with each other by the *size* of our groups. I think you talk about groups based on their *function*. I think the reason some folks talk about groups based on their size is that size *is* their function.

Community is not the endgame for me. The endgame is for us to become a people who are able to live out the aspirations and hopes and dreams of God in the world. I don't think that's possible to do without being in community with each other, but "community" is not the goal. We think it's essential for people to live harmoniously with each other and with God, but that's not the end of the game.

The functions our groups *do* gather around are various. There is a Friday night group that meets for the express purpose of intentionally sharing their lives with each other. I suppose they might look like a house church, but that's not why they gathered. They want to become increasingly interdependent with one another. On Tuesday mornings there is a men's breakfast. It's a group of people who show up really early. The express purpose is *breakfast*. The size is incidental. I play basketball with a group of ten to twenty guys in the morning. I have done that for fourteen years. That's what we *do*; we play basketball. So these are people who are in community with each other, and meet to do these particular functions. There are people who make music together, people who study the Bible together. They are about the function of the group when they get together, not the size of it, and they are not trying to do everything.

I am trying to say that I think there is a way of being a community that "small groups" can actually work against. What you can end up with is a bunch of little collections of disparate groups who happen to show up on Sundays to be serviced by the same religious provider. My concern is that small groups, when they are ends in themselves, or when they are sold as the primary place for community in a church, means that we lose our sense of *obligation* to one another on a wider level. Obligation gets turned into a cost/benefit analysis. I think real community comes about when we realize that we are a people who are connected to each other because of this "other thing". It doesn't matter if we know each other, because we are all part of the same deal. The question becomes, "What makes 'us' an 'us'?" We were just trying to answer that question differently than how the small group folks had answered it.

Questions of Size

We are five years old as a church, with a congregation of several hundred people right now. We get asked a lot how much what we're doing is related to being a certain size—that it's not possible to do this kind of life with a huge church. My answer is this: I suppose I don't think it's possible to have 100,000 people in our church. One hundred thousand attenders strikes me as being slightly too many to do what we do. What that says to me, therefore, is that there *is* a point at which there *are* too many. Maybe it's twenty thousand. Maybe it's five thousand. Maybe it's one thousand. But if we can all agree that there is *some* point at which there are too many people to function as a holistic, missional community of Christians, than all we are dickering about is what that number is. To be a viable Christian community, you need to have enough people that you don't simply know everyone that's there, something beyond your own social network. Beyond that, it depends on the people you have—the skill sets, the personalities that can orchestrate this sort of thing—if you are going to be big. The 300 range seems to be working about right for us right now.

Of course, it's interesting what has happened in the last fifty years as far as size goes: fifty years

ago, an average-size soft drink was six ounces. Today an average-size is *twelve* ounces! That's true with food portions, shopping mall sizes, you name it. I was talking to a guy the other day who knows us pretty well; he was asking, "So, how long do you think you're going to be around? Do you think the point is going to come someday where you follow a larger calling than pastoring this little church?" And I thought, "*little* church?" How is 300 people now construed as *little*? The average church size in America is 78 people. The scale is changed such that we now are forced to justify a "small" church that's not really small.

Room to Develop Leaders and their Dreams

Malcolm Gladwell wrote a very interesting book a few years ago called *The Tipping Point*. He notes that at 150 people, social structures such as schools and other organizations change in ways that are counter-productive to what made them effective in the first place. So I don't know what that size is—and I think it can differ from church to church—but I think there is a size that can actually become counter-productive. Part of that can simply be in the area of leadership development. In the church where I first worked, I started on staff when I was twenty years old. When I left, I was thirty. I said to one of the guys, "You know, when I started on staff here, I was the youngest pastoral staff member, and ten years later, I *still* am!" He said, "I know. When they hired me to be the pastor here, I was thirty-three years old. Now, somebody thirty-three wouldn't even get on the elder board." We wanted Solomon's Porch to be a place where lots of younger or less-experienced people can take lots of responsibility.

We see the importance of this in church planting. The Vineyard's done it really well. Church planting encourages an entire generation of young people to step it up. When you say to people, "Look, this is yours, and you have obligation, responsibility and opportunity here. This is your place; so get it on." That's different than creating a really large church and then breaking out a bunch of sub-ministries where you say to people, "Just worry about your ministry."

An Emphasis on Place

Having a distinctive location and sense of place has been very important to what we're doing. In fact, we had a *place*, an actual building, before we had an "us"! We knew we wanted to be *in* a place, *of* a place, *with* a place. And we've had to figure out how to do communal Christian life in the midst of our highly-mobile automobile culture, which can really work against community. But, that's our day. That's one of the big challenges for churches who take holistic community seriously in the twenty-first century. In the third century, the council of Nicaea had to figure out how to explain Christianity to a Greek mindset, and the church worked very hard and came up with all kinds of wonderful theological adaptors to help that happen. Well, we have a particular setting in *our* day, which is highly-educated, growing metroplexes. If Christianity is transformative only in certain unusual or controlled settings, then this whole thing is really in trouble.

I think there *is* a way to figure out the concept of place that is well-rooted and expansive at the same time. Being people of a place mattered to us, and being people of a Story mattered. That's why we picked our name from the Bible. We wanted all the clues to indicate that we were part of a more grand story than our little version of it. The name, Solomon's Porch, comes from the Temple where the disciples met together, Jews and Gentiles together.

Learning to Work with God

In terms of living in missional ways together, we talk about wanting to become "kingdom of God horticulturalists"—people who look around and can see the kingdom of God growing in a variety of species, recognize it, describe it, participate with it, and join in helping it to grow. Part of that means asking ourselves, "How have we been brought together? What gifts and abilities, opportunities, desires and skills do we have that God has orchestrated for some particular way in this world?"

Our primary supposition to everything we do is figuring out how we live as a good neighbor.

Living as a good neighbor *is*, for me, the missional call of God embodied at a grassroots level in a people. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus was not teaching a new ethic; *every* good Jew knew they were supposed to be a good neighbor. The shocker was that it was the dirty dog Samaritan that was the good neighbor! The shock was not “the *good* Samaritan”; it was “the good *Samaritan?*” We have taken a neighbor approach to our missional life. So if you have a snowblower, let your neighbor use it. If someone is going on vacation and you can water their plants, you do it. It's totally opportunity-driven; if you *can* do it, you do it. That's what you need to be a friend and a good neighbor. You don't check it; you don't do cost-benefit analysis, you don't do studies to see if it's the best way to actualize your yada yada. You just *do* it.

We started this thing called *Vecinos*, the Spanish word for neighbor, where we try to make what we have available to our neighborhood. We have a high-speed internet connection for our church office, so we linked some computers together and made space for our neighbors as a computer lab. We have a kitchen, so we give away food. We know somebody who has a truck, so we help people move.

Discerning Call

There was a big struggle within us about this for awhile. There were folks among us who were saying, “Let's find out what the needs of the neighborhood are.” Our neighborhood is a poor, inner-city, highly social-serviced, immigrant community of mostly Latinos, Somalis, African-Americans, poor whites, and a few social do-gooders. There is an up-and-coming immigrant middle class in our neighborhood. They are buying the houses, while the African-American community that has been there for 50 years is still renting. It's somewhat neighborhood-defined, but not so strongly that if you don't live in the 'hood you are suspect.

We tried at first to find out what all the other social service people were doing, thinking that we could then shoot the gap. But then we started asking, “What if those gaps don't match what we are good at?” Because new people have continued to join our church in the last year or so, we're in a six-month time of discernment to see what God

has brought together with us and see what he is calling us to. We have a lot of people who have gotten to know us and chosen to be part of our church, but we haven't fully gotten to know them, yet. We're saying, Let's tally up the resources in our church, find out what we've got and see what we might make of it—rather than look at the problem and orchestrate ourselves to find a solution to it. In a sense, we're asking what solution we already provide. When you live in a “bad neighborhood”, either literally or metaphorically, you have a lot of needy neighbors. We are having to figure out what we can uniquely do. Having *capacity* to do something is as important as having the raw *ability* to do it. Our missional life is framed by saying that God is doing something in the world and we are going to enter into that, but we are going to enter into it based on who we are and how we've been put together and how we've been wrapped up with each other.

Recovering True Religion

When we were first getting started with things, I had become very fond of using the verse from James, “Religion God our Father accepts as pure and blameless is this: to care for widows and orphans in their distress.” I used it as a counter to the evangelical line that Christianity is a “relationship” with God and not a “religion”. I wanted to reclaim the whole religion thing. A “relationship with God” sounds very individualist and personally beneficial, but religion tends to be something else. So that was part of our conversations with each other right from the beginning.

Soon after we moved into our house, my family and I found ourselves living right next door to a family caring for two foster kids named Ruben and Chico. So we had to decide whether the phrase, “We want to be religious people who care for orphans” was a metaphor or an *actuality*. We had to make a decision: is it “at some point” that we are going to help orphans? Or is it, “Two of them are living next door to you; what are you going to do with *these* guys?” Doing actions which matched my rhetoric meant I had to do something I wasn't capable of; I had to develop the skills and competencies as I went. Figuring out when I could develop it and when we needed to get other people engaged meant that I had to be vulnerable with others. I had to say to them, “There is some-

thing I *have* to do—and that I *can't* do. Would you help me?”

So we adopted Ruben and Chico, which has meant I've had to learn a lot more dependence on other people. There's a reason that most of us don't ever want to end up like Christopher Reeves. It's not just the fun we're going to miss out on—it's the fear that I'm going to have to have someone do everything for me! That's been the hardest part of this whole thing. Interdependence is a daily negotiation. It's not something you decide once. It's an ongoing process of becoming the kind of person I never would have become otherwise.

The Church as Family

That's true in the church, too. I don't know how to be the pastor of an inner-city church and go talk to the guy next door whose twenty-one year old son was shot and killed last night in a gang-related incident. I don't want to do that. I come from a church background that says, “The way you become a successful leader is to figure out the things you do well, and do those things, and *don't* do the other things.” Sure, that makes you a successful leader, but it's not the only part of the negotiation. There's also the part where you have to ask, “How do I involve other people in my life so that I grow and change and become somebody different?”

The adoption of Ruben and Chico was really formative for us for awhile, and so it had impact on the church, as well. We told our folks, “This was not a choice we 'decided' to make; this was a *reality* that we had to figure out how to live with.” It felt more like a diagnosis than a choice. “If these are the kinds of people we are—or are wanting to be—how do we deal with this reality that's living next door to us?” In our minds there was never a moment of choice; it was simply an ongoing process of coming to grips with it. The process was less about making a decision and more about figuring out who we are, given that we're followers of Jesus.

Mutual Transformation

Earlier on, though, folks thought we were crazy. You don't start a church and at the same time upend your family! As it turns out, it could not have been a better scenario, because the way we

wanted to become a church was so similar to the way we were becoming a reconfigured family. We didn't say to Ruben and Chico when they moved in, “Hey, look, we're Pagitts, this is what we do. Find a way to plug in.” What we said was, “Here's what we do. Let's figure out who you are. Now we will become something different than what we were before, and you will become something different than what you were.” We see that same sort of thing developing with the church. We don't say, “Here's who we are as Solomon's Porch; let's find a good assimilation process so you can plug in.” We're saying, “This is who we are. Let's figure out who you are. Let's become a little of you and you become a little of us, and we become a different family as a result.” When we adopted Ruben and Chico, we didn't just become a family that was one-third larger; we became a new kind of family. When new people join into our life at Solomon's Porch, we don't just become the same church community with more people; we become a new kind of people. *-End*

Links www.solomonsporch.com

RECOMMENDED BOOKS



Reimagining Spiritual Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church

By Doug Pagitt and the Solomon's Porch Community (Zondervan, 2004)



The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference

By Malcolm Gladwell (Little, Brown, 2000)

other people about our church. What I like is that we have something to contribute that secular liberals haven't actually accomplished (which exposes the crisis in liberalism). The church has the option of giving *relationship* to the poor, of giving services to them in the context of real and ongoing relationships—rather than just throwing resources at the poor as the agency model does. We are very conscious about not having an “agency” feel to our compassion ministry. Our compassion ministry isn't about just giving out goodies; it's about creating a community.

So you are inviting the poor into relationship as the central piece—with food and clothing as part of that—because the motivation then becomes simply wanting to make sure your friends are provided for?

Relationship is the currency of the kingdom, and you can only grow a ministry built on relationship where people know and trust each other.

How does this concern for community work itself out in your ministry to the poor?

Once a month we have a dinner for a hundred single moms and their children. The moms have a dedicated team that puts on a dinner just for them away from their kids, so they can have adult conversation. That develops relationships like nothing else. It started small, as a small group thing, really, and then we just added services to that ministry gradually—a car care component, a home repair component, a grocery give-away, Christmas gifts from the church. When you walk into the room on those dinner nights, you are walking into a group of people who know each other and love each other. Groceries are set out right at the end, so it's the last thing, not the central thing. The meal keeps getting more creative; now they have chefs and wait-staff, and nice table-settings.

We could grow it faster. If we told the *Ann Arbor News* what's going on, we could get an article about it instantly; but we don't want to because the point is relationship, not numbers. The single moms are meeting each other and getting support from each other. They are meeting others who are not single moms through the team. These are a group of people who hesitate to go to a church, especially a standard church that is billed as a

“family worship center”. We've had single moms who came from fundamentalist churches, women who got pregnant as teenagers and were forced to stand up in front of the congregation and apologize to the whole church, who were told they weren't welcome anymore. So they feel like refugees. I think if you say you are a church that cares practically and relationally for single moms, that tells people a lot about your church.

What would you say to church planters who want to bring this sort of approach to their fledgling church?

I would say that you cannot do this unless you have a heart for it, and you can't fake having that heart. Some people can make the transition and some people can't. If you can't, don't try. There's a guy who moved here from Texas—a big NRA supporter and former Green Beret. He came into our church and about went into shock. But because he has such a big heart for people, he could accept what we were doing and see why we were doing it.

To a young church planter, I'd say, “Take your time. Work from the inside out. Press it out in your own personal life in a way that's workable for you. Think, ‘How can this build relationships? How can the way we do this lead to building relationships and not just getting the task done?’” You can only have a certain number of core convictions; let community be one of them.

There are no easy answers. The wider culture is impoverished in terms of community, and we often experience that poverty ourselves. So it isn't just a matter of conviction, but also lifestyle, and how we choose to live our life. *-End*

Links www.annarborvineyard.org

Bio: Jim Pool, who conducted the interview, is pastor of the Royal Oak Vineyard Church (www.royaloakvineyard.com), a church plant just outside Detroit, Michigan, where he lives with his wife, Megan, and son, Eli. He is a graduate of the Military Academy at West Point and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

in which a great deal of emphasis is put on personal confession and releasing your emotions so that you feel some kind of repair, then it is the evangelical churches that are much more in line with that. The more high church, textually-oriented, liturgy-defined groups are the ones that stand out as being different.

To what degree would you see the flourishing of liberal democracies as “parasitic” on virtues which can only be cultivated within religious communities?

That’s a great question. Because I’m not writing as a believer I feel a little awkward about commenting on some of those matters. As it’s clear at some points in the book, some things bother me. What I call “Salvation Inflation”—that is, a more casual approach to sin—actually bothers me. I feel odd saying that, as it’s not really my business. I would also not mind if there was more resistance to some of the therapeutic aspects of the culture on the part of some of the evangelical communities—not being so willing to go with the flow of popular culture. Of course, I know there is a line of thought that we encounter in people such as Stephen Carter or Stanley Hauerwas that contends for religious believers *recovering* their counter-cultural identity, and lamenting the difficulty believers have in playing that role. I kind of agree with them. I wouldn’t mind seeing more of that counter-cultural resistance. The tricky thing is that I think evangelicals believe they are *already* resisting culture more than they actually are.

That kind of counter-cultural understanding can be at odds with the evangelical understanding of evangelism, can’t it?

That’s not a dilemma I can answer for anybody. I will say this: there is a lot that is problematic about the evangelicals who grasp the culture full-throttle—and yet I can’t say that they are doing the wrong thing. I’m very impressed by Rick Warren, for example. I think he’s a very serious man who uses his considerable ability to reach a very large audience for good purposes. If Rick can get seventeen million people in America to think about living their lives with a sense of purpose, that’s a

tremendous accomplishment! If joining the culture means he’s sacrificing x, y and z but gaining that, that’s pretty good.

Yet despite your concerns about “salvation inflation”, you express discomfort with the approach of those, such as Stanley Hauerwas, who advocate a more counter-cultural stance. What’s your concern there?

Stanley’s term “resident aliens” is something I don’t like. I know it has widespread appeal; you can’t go to any religious college or community in the country without hearing people call themselves “resident aliens”. His books have had tremendous impact. My politics are more centrist, moderate politics, however. If I believe in anything strongly, it’s this idea of citizenship. The term resident aliens implies that people who really are full citizens of their country are just here on a “leave of absence”. If you really take that seriously, those people should not exercise their full responsibilities as citizens. I don’t think that’s the kind of message we should be sending people in the United States.

Your major thesis in the book might be summed up in the sentence, “In every aspect of the religious life, American faith has met American culture—and American culture has triumphed.” But what about examples where the culture is converted, whether during the time of Constantine or what we observe happening in, say, parts of Africa today?

I don’t think that the notion that culture strongly influences religion is unique to America. For example, I think that Nigerian Muslims, Nigerian Anglicans and Nigerian Catholics have more in common with each other because of their *Nigerian-ness* than they do with other Catholics, other Anglicans and other Muslims outside of Nigeria. I don’t know much about Nigeria, but of the Nigerians I know, whatever their faith, they do seem to be stamped by African-ness, by Nigerian-ness. In Latin America, it’s very much the same thing: Catholicism triumphed in Latin America because of its willingness to adopt and incorporate aspects of the pagan Mayan and Incan cultures.

The question in America is whether American culture is more or less powerful as a culture than other cultures. I am of the opinion that we have a very powerful culture. We do not see it that way because, unlike France or Holland, we are a relatively new culture. We don’t have a thousand-year history of our own unique language. We borrowed our language from another country. Everything about us should suggest that we are derivative of Anglo culture. However, I think there is a unique *American* culture that is *enormously* powerful, a culture unlike that of any other country. You can go not very far from where I’m talking to you now, up into Canada, and be in a very, very different culture. Canadian religion is very different from American religion because American *culture* is very different from Canadian culture. So I think we have a uniquely strong culture that has a unique impact on our religious tradition. My position on this question, by the way, is different from that of Samuel Huntington, who also talks about the power of American culture. He thinks our culture has been shaped by Protestantism. I think that Protestantism has been shaped by our culture.

Are you optimistic about the trajectory American culture seems to be on?

I’m generally optimistic. I’m not advocating one way or the other on the question, “Should we be a more religious country or shouldn’t we?” I don’t have a position on that. I’m much more interested in the dynamism of American religion. If you think that religion is a force like culture that changes and adapts and requires a dynamic and innovative element, I think you’d be relatively optimistic. It is fascinating to watch American religion. Who could have predicted something like the Vineyard churches fifty years ago? Who could have predicted Pentecostalism before it emerged? Who could have predicted the way African-American religion has evolved? To me it’s exciting and interesting. But if you are more of the opinion that religion is a “rock of ages” imbued with timeless truths, and that any change is bad, then you’d be pretty depressed about the state of religion in this country.

Do you expect that large numbers of evangelicals will suddenly say at some point, “We’ve been way too participative, too accommodating to the culture, for too long, now.” Do you expect a backlash?

In some ways. I actually sense some signs of it in the craving I’ve observed among evangelicals for a more liturgical kind of worship, a longing for something more majestic. I hear it in talk about music. I sense a lot of dissatisfaction with Christian rock ‘n’ roll worship, even among evangelicals. I would not be surprised if in the area of worship there is a backlash, something in favor of a more transcendental experience.

I am also fascinated by the political implications of a lot of what I found in my research. I was struck by the recent document [about political engagement and social justice] from the National Association of Evangelicals which [Fuller Seminary President] Rich Mouw called “the maturing of the evangelical”, and I think he’s right. The document they produced is an extremely important development. [See links to this document on Vineyard USA’s web site.]

Where do you see this social conscience emerging from evangelicals?

I think it emerges in missionary work, and it emerges among younger people. You are seeing it in the Christian colleges. In some cases I think it’s coming from the churches. Obviously I spent a lot of time at Fuller, and they train an awful lot of preachers there. Fuller is a remarkably multi-cultural environment that is sensitive to social justice. Concern for social justice is just part of what Fuller is about. Fuller is the largest and one of the most prominent evangelical seminaries in the country, so what’s happening there is a real indicator of the future of the evangelical movement.

Does this concern for social action fit with what you sense on a wider grass roots level among evangelicals?

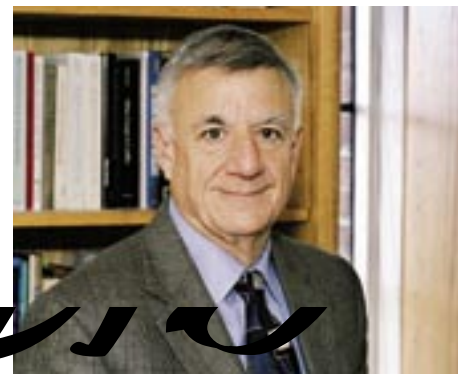
There is a maturing on the grass roots level. The only question is regarding the role government

ought to take in these social concerns. Long before that statement there has been a concern emerging in the evangelical community to make AIDS in Africa a major issue. That concern would appear to my secular friends as coming out of nowhere. They would not expect that at all. I would see that as something evangelicals have taken up as a serious commitment on their own. Now whether that should be viewed as *political* or not is a big question. Most evangelicals would not see that commitment as political, as part of being a Democrat or Republican, for higher taxes or lower taxes or anything else. They would see it as just part of what you do as a Christian. I think that kind of work inevitably focuses on the social justice dimension that’s been part of the long history of Christianity and of evangelicalism, especially in the nineteenth century.

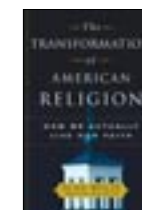
I make reference in my book to the fact that some of the most genuine soul-searching about race relations has taken place in the evangelical world. I should have spelled it out more, but in terms of the history of racism that is so bad in the evangelical history, recent attempts to deal with that have a kind of naturalness and a genuine crossing of racial barriers that elite secular universities have not been able to achieve in their much more stilted affirmative action approach to things.

I’ve been saying for awhile that, based on my research, the days in which there is an automatic identification of evangelicals with Jerry Falwell are over. I’m not saying that evangelicals will suddenly vote Democratic or swing to the Left, but I wonder if they will change the Republican party, and the compassionate side of conservative politics will be forced to become much more prevalent if they are going to hang onto evangelicals instead of just taking them for granted. *-End*

Links: www.bc.edu/boisi



RECOMMENDED BOOKS:



The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith

By Alan Wolfe (Free Press, 2003)

This is a well-written, briskly-paced perspective of the current state of evangelicalism (with ample discussion of Vineyard churches, incidentally)—a book that helps evangelicals understand themselves through the eyes of Alan Wolfe better than they might otherwise.



The Hauerwas Reader

By Stanley Hauerwas, edited by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Duke University Press, 2001).

One of the most persuasive, important voices calling for the church to be distinct from the world is Stanley Hauerwas. Here, in a definitive collection of writings by the man Time magazine named in 2001 “America’s Best Theologian”, are some of the best and most provocative essays written over Hauerwas’ career. Including titles such as “A Christian Critique of Christian America”, “Sex in Public: How Adventurous Christians Are Doing It”, and “Abortion, Theologically Understood”, the collection includes Hauerwas’ take on such topics as the church, reading Scripture, the centrality of following Jesus, war and violence, euthanasia, and suffering.



no place in the “ideal community” for Gloria and Stan—but there is in the *real* community of Jesus.

Community as a Gift

So how do we pursue this community as a gift? We can know we are receiving it as a gift when we are thankful for as little or as much community as we have. That’s the surest sign. We can also know we are receiving it as a gift when we resist the temptation to use community shortcuts. The great temptations given by Satan to Jesus in the wilderness were all about shortcuts: “turn this stone into bread”; “worship me and you can receive the kingship of this world instantly.” When we are pressing to receive an ideal, we are severely tempted to use shortcuts. Here are three to be cautious of:

Shortcuts to Community

One is the “authority shortcut”. One of the marks of traditional, close communities is a strong authority structure. We see that any sense of authority is increasingly absent in our contemporary setting, so we say, “Let’s cook one up and impose it.” The problem is that culture cannot be engineered like that. Culture is organic and depends on a complex array of factors that we cannot just dissect. It’s easy to add authority—but it’s difficult to add *relationship*. So beware. This shortcut will work, but only in the short term.

The second shortcut to be careful about is “the system is the solution”. We live in a technological culture so we have a very high view of systems. When it comes to community, there is a great temptation to think, “How can I find that system which will make community possible?” But the system is not the solution. It’s not just a matter of discovering the “right” small group model.

The last shortcut is the “intense but not sustainable” shortcut. This is the *Friends* shortcut. You want to plant a new church and maybe it’s a young church and you’re a young church planter, so you basically gather around you a group of friends who are single or newly married without children. You are able to experience a wonderfully intense life together—but it’s not sustainable. What you are doing is setting yourself up to have a community that is always hearkening back to its “glorious past”, and *nothing* is worse than that! Believe me, there is nothing worse than having a glorious past. You don’t want to go into forms of community that are not sustainable, or you will be cursed with a glorious past and you will never get over it.

Beyond Generalities

An additional way that we know we are receiving community as a gift is when we refuse to “buy generic”. Community is not in itself good

news. Community alone is *old* news. *Jesus-brand* community is good news. Community itself—generic community, if you will—is not the answer. Remember, before this current decline in social capital, the past wasn’t exactly the kingdom of God, was it? There was *plenty* of “community”—but, as some of you might know, old traditional families are not exactly Garden-of-Eden experiences. You’ve got community out the wazoo, but the solution to the world’s problems is not “community”. Why? Because the world’s community is *ill!* Generic community adds nothing of value. Don’t replace the gospel of Jesus with the gospel of community. If somebody comes to your church and asks the people, “What are you all about?” and they say, “Community,” you are sowing something you don’t want to sow. But if you draw out the implications of community inherent in Jesus and in the Gospel, that’s when you’ll be drinking pure filtered water. If we are truly Christ-centered, we will be led *into* community.

-End

upcoming events

WESTERN REGION

Church Planting Wives’ Retreat

When: October 10 & 11

Details: This beach retreat house in Camarillo is for you if you and your husband have planted a church in the last 4 years.

Contact: To reserve your space contact Ellen Jacobs at 408-371-7896 or email ellen@sjcityvineyard.com; or contact Margie Harper at 805-671-5581 or email margieharper@earthlink.net.

Church Planting in an Evolving Culture

When: January 7-8, 2005

Details: A three-track event for potential planters, existing planters and coaches of planters. Choose a track and join a facilitator and other group members for interactive discussions, speakers, food and ministry time.

Contact: Hosted by Vineyard Community Church in Pomona, CA. For more information contact Randy Knutson at 760-318-4388 or email rknutson@earthlink.net.

SOUTHWEST REGION

Church Planting Intensives

When: October 15-16 in Dallas, TX or November 5-6 in Phoenix, AZ.

Details: A weekend of intensive preparation and interaction with Vineyard leaders and recent church planters about the opportunities and challenges for church planters today. Open to prospective and current church planters, coaches, sending pastors, and anyone interested in Vineyard church planting.

For registration and more information go to www.vineyardcl.org/cpi

Contact: The Dallas intensive will be hosted at the Vista Ridge Vineyard. For more information contact Bob Attaway at 972-219-7654 or email office@rvvineyard.org.

The Phoenix intensive will be hosted at VCF of North Phoenix. For more information contact John Hernandez at 480-777-9900 or email jessica@tempevineyard.com.

EASTERN REGION

Church Planters Boot Camp

When: October 15-16

Contact: Hosted by the Central Maryland Vineyard in Millersville, MD. For more information contact John Elmer at the Syracuse Vineyard at 315-407-8463 or email jelmer@syracusevineyard.org.

MIDWEST REGION

A Cause to Live For, a Cause to Die For

When: November 4-6

Details: We are calling together Vineyard risk-takers in the Midwest region for a time of equipping, imparting, envisioning, challenging, worshiping, and lots of just plain fun. This is for current church planters and their teams, as well as those who are thinking about church planting. Steve Nicholson and Don Williams will be our main speakers, along with various Midwest regional Church Planting Coordinators.

Contact: Hosted by Oak Park Vineyard, IL. Contact Anna Hanson or Michael Gatlin at 218-525-3462 or email cause@duluthvineyard.org