

**ORGANIC VS. INSTITUTIONAL MODELS: CAN THERE BE HAPPY  
MEDIUM?**

By

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## **Introduction**

The Vineyard is a church planting movement that was founded largely on non-traditional forms of church. John Wimber's early successes in church planting were due in large part to his emphasis on small groups - so much so that this eventually led to his being hired as a church growth consultant at Fuller Seminary! Another thing that the Vineyard is well known for outside of the movement (in the larger evangelical community) is its contemporary (i.e. non-traditional) style of worship. And for the most part, Vineyard church planting has taken the approach of planting lots of (small to medium sized) churches rather than a fewer number of large churches. Indeed only a handful of Vineyard churches have grown to the size of the so-called mega church.<sup>1</sup> The Vineyard has always been a movement that has encouraged church planters and other leaders to try "doing church" in *different* ways. As the old Wimber-ism goes: "We spell faith – R-I-S-K!" But as the movement has matured, have we lost our way - forgotten our roots? Have we become *institutionalized*?

## **Organic vs. Institutional: The Current Debate**

Meanwhile, in the larger Evangelical movement a debate rages over more organic forms of church vs. the traditional Institutional model. And it seems that the organic, or simple church movement is gaining ground, or at least a growing number of sympathizers. Millennials, in their quest for something genuine, may not be as impressed by our hip church programs as we might hope. And many, more seasoned, long time church go-ers are tiring of "cool church" and long for something more, something deeper.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Robbins, *Phil 508: Issues in Apologetics* course (Ventura, CA: Fuller Seminary Extension, Spring 2006).

On the one hand we have the Institutional faithful defending their form with “you can’t hate the bride of Christ!” Yet many of the criticisms being leveled by the other side are valid: the horror of Consumer Christianity, the entertainment mentality rampant in the church, the attractional model, program-oriented ministry,<sup>2</sup> hierarchical-ism, internal focus, celebrity Pastors, an organizational focus over against a people focus (no thanks to the church-growth movement here), and the politicizing of evangelicalism – to name just a few. These concerns can hardly be ignored! But at the same time many in the, what I like to call “house-church purist” camp, seem to take a conspiracy theory approach to the debate. The title of the book *Pagan Christianity*<sup>3</sup> alone is evidence of this! Indeed the charge that everyone in leadership in the Institutional Church are nothing but selfish, money grubbing, power hungry, psychotically controlling, narcissistic, unbiblical deceivers is hardly fair.

I myself am quite inclined toward a more organic expression of church. But the truth is that virtually all of my own personal spiritual formation has taken place in the institutional church led by godly people, who were at the very least sincere in their desire to see people come into right relationship with God, to grow continually as disciples of Jesus, and to see the Great Commission accomplished to the maximum extent possible. And, at least to some degree, in my case, that has been successful. Could it have been more successful or growth been more rapid had all this happened in a simpler form of church – sure, quite possibly. And I am personally in a place right now where, reflecting on 20+ years of church experience, I am seriously considering if there is a better way to

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<sup>2</sup> See Thom Rainer & Eric Geiger, *Simple Church* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2001), p. 224 (iBooks version) on participation in programs as a poor metric for church “success.”

<sup>3</sup> George Barna and Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity?: Exploring the Roots of our Church Practices* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2002).

“do church” and if many of the assumptions that we have long held about ‘what is church’ should endure much longer.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of the Organic and Institutional Models**

One of the great strengths of the Organic House Church model is its emphasis on relationships among believers (fellowship) and taking seriously the idea of the body of Christ as a family. The institutional church knows this well and often in its attempts to “stay small as we continue to grow” borrows from this model by implementing small groups into its ministry.<sup>4</sup> But this can often end up as just another program in the catalog of its ministries, rather than becoming core or central to their overall philosophy or vision. Another theme that seems common among more organic groups is flatter leadership models. Unfortunately, among house-church purists, in their quest to preserve their understanding of the New Testament’s “open-participatory<sup>5</sup> form” this rapidly devolves into no leadership, or what I call simply Christian anarchy. It would seem that for many of these folks, previous bad experiences with controlling and/or abusive institutional churches/leaders, has driven them to forbid almost any level of formal leadership in the local church. Also, for smaller, home based fellowships the possibility opens up of celebrating the Lord’s Supper as a genuine covenant memorial meal (i.e. agape feast), rather than a religious ritual snack - whereas large church gatherings would struggle with maintaining the intimacy of this sacramental form to say nothing of the

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<sup>4</sup> According to Ralph Moore, *Cell Church Seminar* (5 tape series, circa 1993), small groups must be central to the church’s vision, from top down, in order for the cell church model to succeed.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), p. 61.

logistical problems of providing dinner for hundreds of congregants. Indeed I believe this is largely the symptoms of which we are seeing in 1 Cor. 11:17-34.

On the other hand, there are many things that large mega-churches can accomplish which small churches of 100-200 could simply never pull off (let alone a house church). Without Vineyard Columbus, there would likely be no Vineyard Institute (in the U.S.) to train future leaders and church planters of our movement. Without Mars Hill there might never have been an Acts 29 Church Planting network. Large churches are also able to give away resources to help others in the body of Christ. And that is to say nothing of denominations which have built Theological Seminaries, Hospitals, and large scale social justice programs. And yet large Institutional churches have their challenges too. Even the architectural layout of our churches (including esp. seating plan) promotes more of a theater-style feel thus promoting an entertainment (vice participatory) mentality among its “attendees.” Program oriented ministry seems to encourage a consumer mentality (already rampant in our society) in the church. Indeed, in order to maintain attendance numbers, churches are almost forced into providing the Christian products and services that Christian consumers demand lest they take their tithe and head off to another church down the street with more appeal (or better programs for them and their family).

### **Organic vs. Institutional: Could There Be A Happy Medium?**

Could it be that rather than pitting these two ecclesiological models against each other and forcing one to choose between the two, that instead a better answer is *Both - And*.<sup>6</sup> Rather than this being simply a nice philosophy of avoiding extremes on one side

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<sup>6</sup> Borrowing from the book by Rich Nathan with Insoo Kim, *Both – And: Living the Christ Centered Life In an Either-Or World* (IVP Books, 2013).

or the other, this may be exactly what we see in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:17-18) – a multitude of house-churches which also, at times, came together in a larger corporate gathering of the churches (ἐκκλησίαι – plural as in Rom 16:4, 16).<sup>7</sup> Could the cell-church model be just what the doctor ordered here? Could the cell church be the compromise to end once-and-for-all the war between the organic church movement and the traditional Institutional model? Given human nature, perhaps not once-and-for-all, but it is surely worth considering as a “best of both worlds” approach.

According to Ralph Moore, anyone can Pastor a cell church! All you need to do is develop a weekly sermon and hold a meeting with your staff once a week. Is that an exaggeration? Perhaps, but it depends on how closely you actually stick to a pure cell-church model. It also probably depends on whether your church embraces the end-all, be-all, do-all, Senior Pastor model of church government. Remember, in his cell-church model, all small groups use a sermon-based discussion format (lightening the load on the house-church pastors), and all of your pastoral care comes from your small group, not the larger institutional church body. One thing is for sure, consumer Christians, will flee from a cell church like the place is on fire! Because they’re not going to get the program-based ministry that they have become so accustomed to. The problem that so many Institutional churches run into when they try to implement a small groups program is just that. Their small groups end up being just another program offered among their catalog of available ministries.<sup>8</sup> In short, they end up being “a church that *has* small groups, rather than a church *of* small groups.”

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<sup>7</sup> See also Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, revised edition (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), p. 32 on 1 Cor. 14:23, et al.

<sup>8</sup> Again see Rainer & Geiger, *Simple Church*, p. 193-194 (iBooks version) on rejecting the ‘menu of programs philosophy of ministry.’

Let's think about this in a Vineyard context for a moment. We are a church planting movement. And in Moore's model, once a small group hits consistently over 12 adults in regular attendance (better 'participation'), it's time to multiply (i.e. create another cell). If we just shift our thinking a bit to view each cell group as an ἐκκλησία (an *assembly* of Jesus followers gathered for prayer, worship, teaching and fellowship – Acts 2:42-47) then each new cell group (multiplication) is a church plant (or at the very least a *potential* church plant)!

And now, let's incorporate some ideas from the Parish movement,<sup>9</sup> into this model. That's right, a community-based church! So basically I'm proposing to take their idea of community or neighborhood based church and adapt/apply it to this idea blending Organic and Institutional church forms in the Cell church model. Rather than just creating another Institutional church, what if we created something like a network of inter-related house churches wherein the larger Corporate body existed not to grow itself (i.e. to make the organization larger and larger – as in the church growth movement philosophy) but instead existed to empower, equip, support and provide training to the smaller community / neighborhood based cell-churches? Now-a-days, Christian consumers typically drive to the church of our choice, hopefully close to where we live (maybe in the same city) but not necessarily in their own neighborhood. What if we could change the culture to where the (cell) "church" we attend is based upon geo-location (proximity to our home/in our own community) rather than based on own "freedom" to pick and choose who we think is "coolest" small group leader in our church? There could still be a larger corporate

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<sup>9</sup> See Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (IVP Books, 2014). Or, for an abbreviated version, see "How the Local Movement is Revitalizing Church" (Relevant blog, accessed March 21, 2015), <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/how-local-movement-revitalizing-church>

gathering that supports these neighborhood based house-churches. Wouldn't this be a great way to cover/reach a city with smaller neighborhood based outreach cells?

### **There Has Got to be a Better Metric than “Butts In Seats”**

For far too long, two metrics have dominated how many Evangelical churches have measured success: attendance and salvations. For roots of these trends we can look at the church growth movement (which some assert may have done more harm, than good), Evangelicalism's obsession with “decision-ism,”<sup>10</sup> and the revivalism of the likes of George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards. But rather perhaps, we should to look at the Great Commission for a better metric on how to measure the success of our churches (i.e. discipleship vice conversions), if indeed these are our primary marching orders (given by Jesus just prior to His ascension, in the Great Commission).

How well are we doing at making and sending disciples? Can we even come up with better metrics for measuring things like spiritual growth, spiritual maturity (conformity to the image of Christ, a.k.a. sanctification)? How do we measure that a person has moved from point A to point B on the spiritual formation spectrum? Things that we might want to look at include:

- How many of our people are involved in regular, one-on-one (or one-on-many) discipleship relationships?
- How many are being discipled and how many are discipling others?

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<sup>10</sup> For how decision-ism may be a gross misunderstanding and departure from the gospel as proclaimed by Jesus and the Apostles see Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Zondervan, 2001).

- How good of a job are we doing of instilling a sense of missional “sent-ness” in our people?<sup>11</sup>
- How many of us have developed a regular habit of spiritual disciplines (Bible reading, prayer, fasting, silence, solitude)?
- Are people experiencing some form of spiritual breakthrough in areas like sin, bondage, unhealthy relationships?

Which leads us to the question: are people actually being transformed by their encounter with Christ? Let’s face it, we all know that not everyone who makes a “profession of faith” shows up the next week, or six months later even in cases where he or she appeared to be so on fire when they first “got saved!” Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer have written the book on Transformational Church!<sup>12</sup> Stetzer says “we need to find out how to count transformation. Are people being transformed and becoming agents of God’s mission? Are they sharing Christ with their neighbors? Getting converts is great, but are they learning to live and grow as believers and are they sharing Christ with others? We must begin tracking discipleship and missional living... We have to consider things like:

- What percentage of people in the church are serving?
- How many are serving inside and outside the church?
- How many are in small groups?

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<sup>11</sup> See Patrick O’Connell, “Measuring the Sending Capacity of Your Church (Mission Glue Blog, accessed March 21, 2015), <http://missionglue.com/2014/05/12/measure-the-sending-capacity-of-your-church/>

<sup>12</sup> Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 2010).

- How many are being trained into leadership in groups and in the church?”<sup>13</sup>

Stetzer and Rainer seem to focus on four things: Missional, Relational, Prayerful and Worshipful. But their work seems more focused on the *what* to measure rather than the *how* of collecting these metrics. Vineyard Columbus has used a bi-yearly survey of their congregation since 2002.<sup>14</sup> We can certainly debate whether a periodic congregational survey is a good way to measure spiritual formation, but here’s my attempt at a list of survey questions which might serve to start a conversation along these lines:

- What percentage of our people are intentionally discipling at least one other person?
- What percentage of our people are currently being discipled by a more mature follower of Christ?
- What percentage of our people are regularly involved in a small group?
- What percentage of our people have shared the good news, witnessed about Christ or shared their testimony in the last week, last month, last year?
- What percentage of our people have planted seeds, developed a relationship with an unbeliever, or offered to pray for someone, with the explicit intention of reaching those who aren’t currently following Jesus?
- How many people in our church are currently considering planting a church?
- How many people in our church are currently being trained (in the pipeline) to plant a church, or be sent out on mission?

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<sup>13</sup> Ed Stetzer “Counting Correctly: Creating the Right Scorecard for Churches” (The Exchange blog, accessed April 6, 2015), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/december/counting-correctly-create-right-scorecard-for-churches.html?paging=off>

<sup>14</sup> See Training Technologies Incorporated website (accessed March 21, 2015), <http://www.surveytracker.com/news/success-service.htm>

- What percentage of our people attend weekly corporate worship *more than 75%* of the time?
- What percentage of our people have some form of regular, recurring prayer life (beyond just saying grace at meals)?
- What percentage of our people have developed a regular, recurring discipline of Bible reading?
- What percentage of our people have experienced a significant “breakthrough” in a relationship, finances, overcoming sin, deliverance from bondage, forgiveness, healing, fear, etc. in the past year?

Now I’m not convinced that this is a perfect list. And there are certainly some things that could be questioned here including: what does participation in a small group really tell us about a person’s walk with Christ? And are disciplines like prayer and Bible reading *necessarily* leading directly to (or indications of) genuine spiritual transformation? One might even ask why we are talking about better metrics in a paper on Organic vs. Institutional church forms? For one thing Organic churches are by their very nature more relational. And much of what is driving people toward a more organic expression of *ekklesia* is a dissatisfaction with the status quo of Institutional forms. The bottom line is that many of our Evangelical churches are filled with *nominal* Christians.

## **Conclusion**

Given current church trends of decline, many are saying that Evangelical churches (which I see the Vineyard movement as a part of) will not survive in their current form(s). Some advocates of the Organic movement are saying that theirs is the wave of

the future for the church in the west. Whether they are correct, I do not know, and only time will tell. But I do see a thirst for something more, something deeper in both older seasoned believers (boomers, like myself), as well millennials (with their thirst for authenticity and genuineness), than current corporation-modeled institutional churches seem to be able to provide/offer. The age of “cool church” may have peaked.

Has the Vineyard lost its way, and strayed from our roots? I think that we are far too diverse of a movement to make such a sweeping generalization! But I do believe that now is a good time to continue to look at the successes and mistakes of both our past and present, in order to chart a course for current individual churches, future church plants and the movement as a whole! The cell church provides a promising model which includes the best of organic church forms without completely abandoning all form and structure found in so many of our churches following in the Vineyard tradition of the classic church plant model.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Small Town USA Webinar – “Meet the Partnership” (November 18, 2014) for the 5 Church Planting models currently being used by the Multiply Vineyard Small Town USA Partnership <http://multiplyvineyard.org/2015/01/27/video-1st-small-town-usa-webinar/> (accessed March 21, 2015).

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