

DAVID A. ROOZEN & JAMES R. NIEMAN, EDITORS

# CHURCH, IDENTITY, AND CHANGE

THEOLOGY AND DENOMINATIONAL  
STRUCTURES IN UNSETTLED TIMES

## **Routinizing Charisma: The Vineyard Christian Fellowship in the Post-Wimber Era**

**Donald E. Miller**

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# CHURCH, IDENTITY, and CHANGE

*Theology and Denominational Structures  
in Unsettled Times*

Edited by

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# Routinizing Charisma: The Vineyard Christian Fellowship in the Post-Wimber Era

*Donald E. Miller*

In its twenty years of existence the Vineyard Christian Fellowship has been an influential, innovative, and yet oftentimes tumultuous organization. In terms of influence, it has grown to over five hundred congregations in the United States, a rather remarkable achievement in two decades. Equally impressive, there are as many Vineyards outside the United States as within, and in countries as diverse as South Africa and Australia. Secondly, there is little question but what the Vineyard has contributed to creating a new paradigm of culturally relevant churches. Vineyard music is sung throughout the world, and hundreds of non-Vineyard churches welcome the Holy Spirit into their worship in ways that did not occur prior to the renewal conferences of John Wimber. In addition, the Vineyard has been at the forefront of a movement to equip laypersons for ministry, and quite literally to give the ministry back to the people. But thirdly, this innovation has been accompanied by a substantial amount of organizational change and challenge. For example, one of the cofounders of the movement, Kenn Gulliksen, left the Vineyard because he felt it had become too bureaucratic. The other founder, John Wimber — and the person with whom people typically identify the Vineyard — died in 1997 after a prolonged struggle with cancer, leaving a leadership vacuum. Wimber's successor as national director, Todd Hunter, resigned the position after two and one-half years to pursue a calling to plant churches that will minister to Generation X young adults and those with a postmodern mentality.<sup>1</sup>

Of the case studies in this book, the Vineyard is the youngest organization to be studied. But it has had visibility and impact far in excess of its 80,000

1. The discussion of the Vineyard movement in this chapter ends with the resignation of Todd Hunter as national director in May 2000.

members in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Therefore several important questions can appropriately be asked. For example, what does the mercurial growth of the Vineyard tell us about how innovation occurs within the Christian tradition? What lessons are to be learned from the Vineyard regarding transitions in organizational leadership? And are there features of the Vineyard's "genetic code" that have application to its ongoing evolution as a Christian movement? The answers to these questions will be drawn from several years of personal visits I made to Vineyard Christian Fellowships in southern California and around the nation.<sup>3</sup> In addition, I will draw on two surveys of Vineyard pastors,<sup>4</sup> along with extensive conversations with both Wimber and Hunter regarding their vision for the Vineyard.<sup>5</sup> In terms of the perspective I bring to this analysis, it is important to note that I am an "outsider" to the Vineyard movement — belonging to a large, politically progressive, noncharismatic Episcopal church in southern California. However, I also have been influenced by doing research in dozens of Pentecostal and charismatic churches in the developing world,<sup>6</sup> as well as by my research on "new paradigm" churches in the United States, and from this research I have learned that divorcing heart and head, mind and body, is often fatal to the Christian mission.<sup>7</sup>

2. The statistics cited in this chapter are drawn from a database compiled in 1998 by the Association of Vineyard Churches. Updated information can be found on their Web site (<http://www.vineyardusa.org/index2.htm>).

3. Much of the research for this chapter was done in the early 1990s for my book *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

4. The first survey was conducted in 1992/93 as part of the research for *Reinventing American Protestantism*. The second survey was conducted in 1999 after John Wimber's death, with the specific intention of assessing the views of Vineyard pastors about the status of the Vineyard movement.

5. The conversations with John Wimber spanned several years in the mid-1990s and included one two-day interview period that was very relaxed and informal. The interviews with Todd Hunter were done after he became national director.

6. Ted Yamamori and I have conducted more than three hundred interviews in nearly twenty different countries as part of a project documenting growing Pentecostal churches that have active social ministries in their communities. See our forthcoming *Pentecostalism and Social Transformation: A Global Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, in press).

7. See my *Reinventing American Protestantism*, pp. 6-8, for a discussion of the influence of new paradigm churches on my own thinking.

## John Wimber and the Vineyard's Genetic Code

Founders of movements play an important role in setting the genetic code that defines what evolves after their death, and Wimber is no exception.<sup>8</sup> I clearly remember my first impressions of Wimber. The Anaheim Vineyard had purchased a large parcel of land in an industrial park. Work had begun on building a three-thousand-seat auditorium within the walls of a warehouse and office complex. In the meantime, however, the church was gathering under a huge nylon tent structure that had been erected in the building's parking lot. There was a stage/platform at one end of the tent, where an extensive sound system was located, which looked over a couple thousand folding chairs set up on outdoor grass-colored carpet.

For the first thirty minutes or so of the service, the usual soft rock worship songs were sung and people stood, sat, or kneeled as their inclination prompted them, some with their hands held out in expectation and others with hands raised, especially during songs that were praising "the God on high." When the worship period ended, offering baskets were then passed — without commentary — followed by a somewhat overweight man in his late fifties walking up to a bare podium. Wimber read a passage of Scripture and then started to share his interpretation of its meaning, mixed with personal anecdotes. There was no shouting, no dramatic gestures, just an understated sharing of an evangelical message that was filled with a transparent expectation that the Holy Spirit was in our midst.<sup>9</sup>

As the message wound to a close, Wimber invited people to come forward for prayer. To my great surprise, they came by the dozens. In a very informal manner lay members warmly approached each person, and putting an arm around the person — or placing a hand on his or her shoulder — asked the person a few questions and then prayed. When the area around the stage became too crowded, Wimber invited people to raise their hands so Christians around them could pray for them where they stood. No one left the tent. Ministry time was as important as the preaching and worship.

Before long there were little groupings everywhere. Some people were weeping. A few were wailing. Others seemed to be physically touched by the

8. Vineyard pastors frequently make reference to the DNA of the Vineyard movement, and I find this biological metaphor very useful in understanding the evolution of the Vineyard church.

9. Many popular understandings of charismatic leadership associate the term with dynamic political expression or even televangelist pulpit pounding and gesticulation. Wimber's charisma was of a different sort, and was much more appropriate to a baby boomer audience that rejected such coercive personality types.

Spirit, and were shaking. What was rather bewildering to me was that all of this was happening without any great emotional hype by Wimber. He had quietly invited the Spirit into our midst. This was nothing like the flame-throwing theatrics of the televangelists. What I was later to understand is that this form of worship was a unique blending of Wimber's heritage in a Quaker church, mixed with deep evangelical convictions, and radicalized by a belief that God is still healing the sick and intervening in people's lives, just as was occurring in the first century.

John Wimber was born in Peoria, Illinois, of hillbilly stock. His route out of this blue-collar beginning was through music, and by age fifteen he was playing his first professional gig at the Dixie Castle in Orange County, California, near where his parents had settled.<sup>10</sup> Before long, however, he learned that he could make more money *managing* bands than he could *playing* in them. During one of my interviews with Wimber before he died, John said he had owned and operated fifty-two different businesses. This business acumen served him well when he later became a church consultant, because it was a small stretch for him to apply his understanding of people and American culture to the growth and decline of congregations.

In spite of the gratitude Wimber felt toward the Friends church which had nurtured him in the faith after his conversion as an adult, he thought their days were numbered. Sitting in his office one afternoon after his cancer surgery, Wimber recounted, "I remember standing shortly after I was converted in the Quaker church, looking at it as a business, out on the front lawn, and thinking, 'This place is going out of business, and I love this place. I met Jesus here. But the building is in the wrong place; it's the wrong kind of building.'" Indeed, he was convinced that many mainline churches had been going out of business for a long time, but they just did not realize it. Only their endowments, in his view, would cushion their collapse.

Hence, when the opportunity came to start his own church, it had a radically contemporary sound. The music drew on the same idiom as the unconverted were listening to in bars and at rock concerts, but the lyrics were different. The revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s had severely damaged propositional theology, but they had also opened the door to pragmatic, experiential verification of truth. In short, there was a new openness to transcendent realities that

10. In an interview for the Vineyard publication, John Wimber's widow, Carol, quotes from a *Christianity Today* article that described her husband during his Righteous Brothers period as a "beer-guzzling, drug-abusing pop musician, who was converted at the age of 29 while chain-smoking his way through a Quaker-led Bible study." "The Way It Was: The Roots of Vineyard Worship," *Cutting Edge* 6, no. 1 (winter 2002), [http://www.vineyardusa.org/publications/newsletters/cutting\\_edge/2002\\_winter/carol\\_wimber.htm](http://www.vineyardusa.org/publications/newsletters/cutting_edge/2002_winter/carol_wimber.htm).

resonated with Wimber's Quaker mysticism, and the new worship style of the Vineyard made cultural sense so long as one threw out the fundamentalist's dispensational theology and instead believed that God was in the same business today that he was two millennia earlier.

When teaching at Fuller Seminary, Wimber had encountered the writings of theologian George Ladd, and with this foundation in hand he started telling people they should do the "stuff" practiced by Jesus and the disciples: praying for the sick, casting out demons, feeding the poor and hungry — all of which is the work of the kingdom. If there is no response, believed Wimber, then at least one is following in the footsteps of Jesus, doing the things Jesus counseled his followers to do. The results, in his view, are not up to Jesus' disciples. God is in charge and does things in his own ways and in his own time. We are but his instruments.

From the beginning, the focus of the Vineyard was not on Wimber and his charismatic powers. Wimber saw his job as one of equipping the saints to do the work of ministry.<sup>11</sup> This was to be a people's movement. And it was to be rooted in a clear theology and ideology, not just ephemeral, ecstatic experience. Repeatedly in interviews Wimber told me that he wanted to be a Wesley, not a Whitefield — meaning that he wanted to establish a movement that would endure, not one built around a personality. According to Wimber, "Whitefield came, died, left converts, but we couldn't find any of them anywhere. Wesley came, died, and left a movement. That's what I wanted to do," he said. "So when God gave me the opportunity, I said, 'Okay, Lord.'"

Outsiders to the Vineyard movement oftentimes miss the movement-building component of the Vineyard. They seize only on the spectacular moments of the Vineyard's history, and indeed there are some. Peter Wagner, when he was professor of world missions at Fuller Seminary, invited Wimber to coteach a course that turned into a laboratory for healing and deliverance.<sup>12</sup> In retrospect, seminary is a place to *study* theology, not *practice* the works of the kingdom, and so, amidst great discussion and controversy, Wimber's sojourn as a noncredentialed professor ended. And late in Wimber's life, the Toronto Vineyard erupted with signs and wonders that resembled worship during the Great Awakenings in American religious history. People laughed uncontrollably, made strange animal sounds, and took the presence of the Spirit to heights that worried even the progressive Wimber — and so he eventually sent them packing.<sup>13</sup>

11. Not surprisingly, the title of the Vineyard's magazine for many years was *Equipping*.

12. C. Peter Wagner subsequently embraced many of the manifestations of the Holy Spirit that were practiced in this class. Indeed, he has been a primary apologist for what he calls the New Apostolic Movement within Christianity.

13. See Margaret M. Poloma, "The 'Toronto Blessing': Charisma, Institutionalization and Revival," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 2 (1997): 257-71.

Fundamental to Wimber's vision, however, was the desire to give the ministry back to the people. There is no reason for clergy to wear vestments or collars that separate them from their flock. Pastors are not specially endowed superhumans; they sin like everyone else; they have no magical powers. Hence, Wimber used to joke that he prepared for a healing meeting by drinking a diet Pepsi and watching a little TV. After all, he was not the one doing the healing. It was God. In spite of Wimber's charismatic presence, he was an unusually modest and humble person, always turning the glory to God and taking no credit for himself.

If Wimber had a mission in life, it was to ground people in the biblical narratives and train them to do the works of the Spirit. Consequently, Wimber was unusually candid before audiences about his own shortcomings. And he frequently joked during a service, especially when people got too wrapped up in the drama of "signs and wonders," thereby regrounding them in the everyday world. Because for Wimber there was no sacred-secular divide. The kingdom was here, to be enjoyed in the moment.

In his management style Wimber was sometimes autocratic. He genuinely believed that God spoke to him, and that he should be obedient. Hence, it did not make sense to Wimber that he should submit his vision for discussion and democratic vote. According to one of his close friends, this was both Wimber's genius and his weakness. If one didn't like the direction the Vineyard was going, one could bail out. Led by the Spirit, Wimber was a great risk-taker in charting a new course. One of his close associates said that Wimber was willing "to bet the whole farm" on some of the directions the Vineyard took, and it was this quality that enabled him to be a religious innovator.

In hindsight, some of the swings in the Vineyard, by Wimber's own admission, were mistakes. But he was willing to explore new ideas and then, if he was wrong, to confess his sins and boldly move ahead once again. Consequently, the Vineyard was never static. Under his leadership it was always pushing the envelope, exploring new models for expressing the compassion of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The one person, however, who did regularly offer him counsel was his wife, Carol.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, some of the core values of the Vineyard are convictions that emerged out of her deep prayer life. The daughter of a physician, Carol Wimber has been an influential and articulate presence in the movement. On more than one occasion God spoke to her in dreams, and indeed, John viewed his wife as a vessel of the Holy Spirit's instructions to him. For example, in 1988 John was pushing hard at a pastors conference to identify the Vineyard as a de-

14. See the interview with Carol Wimber, "The Way It Was."

nomination. In his view it was the rebelliousness of baby boom generation pastors that caused them to resist structure and authority, even though it was precisely this rejection of the institutionalization of religion that had led them to the Vineyard in the first place. Carol Wimber, however, had a vision that caused her husband to reconsider his attempt to denominationalize the Vineyard, and Wimber came away from the conference with a strong feeling that the Vineyard movement should die, and for the next two or three years he did much soul-searching about its future.

## **The Origins of the Vineyard**

The organizational founder of the Vineyard is Wimber, but the person who gave the movement its name and started the first Vineyard church is Kenn Gulliksen. In the early 1970s Gulliksen returned from a stint in the United States Air Force and moved to El Paso, Texas, to lead a Calvary Chapel–associated ministry called the Jesus Chapels. This work grew rapidly, in part because of a migration out of an Episcopal church by people who were attracted to Gulliksen’s emphasis on the presence of the Holy Spirit. Viewing himself as a church planter, Gulliksen moved back to southern California after this church was booming and launched the first Vineyard church as a Bible study in the home of Chuck Girard in July 1974. Within months this church also exploded with growth. In an interview Gulliksen said, “This may sound very unhumble and very arrogant, but we fully expected it because the one thing that we learned at Calvary [Chapel] was how to have vision.” The methodology was simple: “I played guitar and sat on a stool and led some worship and taught the Bible.” At the end of each service, Gulliksen said he invited forward anyone who wanted to receive Christ, and they came forward in droves. In addition to the several thousand people who worshiped weekly at this church, another half-dozen Vineyards were started in the next few years — all under the broad umbrella of Calvary Chapel.

Simultaneously another branch of the Vineyard was forming. In 1963 a jazz musician, record producer, and self-professed heathen was introduced to Jesus. By 1970 Wimber was leading eleven Bible studies a week that included many people who were attending the Yorba Linda Friends Church in southern California. In 1971 he was invited to join the staff of the church, and from 1974 to 1978 Wimber served as a consultant at the Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth associated with Fuller Theological Seminary. While Wimber was still working for Fuller, a group of young adults from the Friends church were packing out the home of one of the members. Wimber began to feel a call

to minister to this group, having grown rather discouraged by what he was observing in many mainline churches across the country. On May 8, 1977, a group of 150 people officially declared themselves Calvary Chapel of Yorba Linda, and within a few years the group had grown to 1,500 people, moving from one rented school auditorium to another. By 1980 the Holy Spirit was moving powerfully in their worship, with people speaking in tongues and claiming healing from physical and psychological ailments.

At a fateful meeting in 1982, Chuck Smith, founder of Calvary Chapel, gathered together some of the pastors of the larger churches in the movement, including Kenn Gulliksen, John Wimber, Mike McIntosh, Greg Laurie, Jeff Johnson, and Raul Reis. Several of these young pastors immediately put Wimber on the hot seat for the exercise of charismatic gifts in his church. In spite of Chuck Smith's background in a Pentecostal church, he de-emphasized overt expression of tongues, prophecy, and healing in public worship. In my separate interviews with Smith, Gulliksen, and Wimber, they all shared the same essential recollections of this meeting. After being interrogated by some of the other pastors, Wimber suggested changing the name of his congregation. Smith concurred and noted that Wimber's emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit had many parallels to what was occurring at Gulliksen's Vineyard church. A friendship had already developed between Wimber and Gulliksen, so the match seemed perfect. Thus the Vineyard movement was born in 1982 as an organizational entity separate from Calvary Chapel.

Shortly after this meeting the oversight of this fledgling Vineyard movement passed from Gulliksen to Wimber. In rehearsing the early history of the Vineyard, Gulliksen said he felt like he was on the verge of an emotional breakdown at this time, overwhelmed by the demands of pastoring a large congregation and looking after the new church plants that had occurred. In contrast, Wimber was highly experienced in organizational issues, having run several businesses and, more importantly, having visited some two thousand churches during his years as a church growth consultant.

According to Gulliksen, "John was like a savior in a fat man's body for me at the time. . . . When John came, we had really no organization apart from a deep love for one another and a relationship." Gulliksen had always been a "pioneer," not a "homesteader," and he saw his gift as the ability to plant new churches and then to give them to someone else to tend. In fact, in 1983, the year after Wimber took over the leadership, Gulliksen went to Newport Beach and started another Vineyard, which quickly grew to 1,400 people.

A point of disagreement between Wimber and Chuck Smith is how many Calvary Chapels defected from the movement to join the Vineyard's more charismatic emphasis. Wimber estimates thirty; Smith says as many as a hundred.

Whichever number is more accurate, Gulliksen maintains that these “adoption” into the Vineyard movement “were pastored by people who were hungry for more of the Holy Spirit in their own churches and in their own lives. They were risk-takers, possibly more pioneering, and they were people who had had previous relationships with John.”

### **The Current Status of the Vineyard**

According to the Vineyard’s database, in 1998 there were 490 churches. These congregations range from new church starts with a few members to congregations with several thousand members. Although the Vineyard started in southern California, it is important to note that there are currently Vineyard churches in forty-eight states. As one might expect, California far outstrips the other states, with over one hundred congregations. But it is notable that Washington, Texas, Ohio, Florida, and Colorado all have twenty or more congregations.<sup>15</sup>

The largest Vineyard is led by Steve Sjogren in Cincinnati, Ohio, with 3,200 adults and 1,100 children attending weekly. Also in Ohio (Westerville), there is a large congregation with 3,000 adults and 710 children. The “mother” church of the Vineyard, in Anaheim, is third in size, with youth and adults totaling slightly over 2,600. Other states with Vineyard churches ranking in the “top twenty” include Arizona, Idaho, Colorado, Texas, Illinois, Georgia, Indiana, North Carolina, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Virginia.

During the decade after the Vineyard was founded, there were approximately a dozen new church plants each year. In addition, there were “adoption,” or churches that decided to join the Vineyard movement, typically because their pastor and/or people had experienced some type of “renewal” that led them to be more open to the gifts of the Spirit, including healing and direct guidance by the Holy Spirit. Beginning in 1993, the number of new church plants increased, with over forty new congregations added to the movement in both 1996 and 1997.

During the history of the Vineyard, the ratio of new church plants to adoptions has been approximately 3 to 1, although the number of adoptions may decline now that Wimber-led renewal conferences are no longer being held, many of which drew non-Vineyard pastors and members.

15. For several graphic presentations of these and the following statistics about the Vineyard, see “Maps and Figures for ‘Routinizing Charisma’: The Vineyard Christian Fellowship in the Post-Wimber Era,” listed under “Donald E. Miller” at [http://hirr.hartsem.edu/sociology/sociology\\_sociologists\\_of\\_religion.html#M](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/sociology/sociology_sociologists_of_religion.html#M).

Vineyards seem to grow in all types of soil. Our survey of pastors shows that approximately 30 percent are in cities with a population of over a quarter-million people, 21 percent are in cities of 100,000–250,000, and there are also Vineyards in small cities. The Vineyards are distributed fairly broadly across the United States, although the West Coast has a disproportionate number.

The Vineyard is still not a large movement. The number of individuals attending Vineyard churches on any given Sunday is less than 100,000, which is remarkable given the widespread attention the Vineyard has received. Nevertheless, it is a growing movement and appears to be well positioned to spread its influence given the broad distribution of churches throughout the United States.

By all accounts the Vineyard is a very young movement. According to our survey of pastors, the median congregation was started in 1990. Fully three-quarters of the respondents to our survey are the founding pastors of their churches. The average church has slightly fewer than one full-time paid professional staff member other than the senior pastor. The median operating budget of a Vineyard is \$230,000 annually. The median weekly church attendance is 203 adults and 70 children. Comparing data from our survey with one I conducted several years ago, we see that the average Vineyard appears to be growing by about 50 adult members every five years. This is a reasonably strong growth rate, especially if new churches are also being planted each year.

The median age of pastors is forty-five, which places them squarely within the baby boomer category. However, less than 1 percent of the pastors are under thirty years of age, and one in ten is under thirty-five. Hence, the Vineyard is genuinely concerned about its ability to connect with Gen-Xers, even though their clergy population is substantially younger, for example, than Presbyterian pastors, whose average age is fifty-five. Anecdotal evidence indicates that clergy of all denominations tend to draw members that share many of their characteristics. Not only is this true for age, but also for education and background experiences. Hence, it is important to note that a quarter of the Vineyard pastors do not have a college degree, although it is also significant that another quarter have some type of postgraduate degree.

In terms of racial/ethnic background, Vineyard pastors are 95 percent Anglo and the Vineyard is overwhelmingly a “white” church. It is true, however, that a network of twenty-five “La Vinas” is emerging in southern California in response to the substantial increase in the Latino population, and Vineyard-style worship seems to communicate well in this setting. There is also a fairly healthy sprinkling of Asians who have been attracted to the Vineyard, although only 2 percent of the pastors are Asian.

Vineyard pastors are exclusively male, although half of them indicate that

they “copastor” with their wives (even though only 18 percent of the spouses receive a separate salary from the church). In terms of church backgrounds, approximately one-quarter of the pastors we surveyed indicated that they attended church less than once a month as an adolescent, and those who did attend regularly were most likely to have gone to a nondenominational church, an Assemblies of God, a Calvary Chapel, or a Southern Baptist church. Once again, these background characteristics have implications for the type of members that the Vineyard will attract.

### A Moment of Crisis

On November 17, 1997, John Wimber died of a massive brain hemorrhage. For several years he had not been healthy. In 1995 Wimber had a stroke; in 1993 he was diagnosed with cancer; and before that, in 1986, he suffered a heart attack. Wimber was always struggling with his weight. But he was also the target of substantial criticism by his evangelical brethren who couldn't tolerate the supernatural manifestations that undergirded Wimber's ministry. For a long time Wimber did not respond to these criticisms — he believed that Christians should turn the other cheek — but he felt these attacks deeply, and this uncharitable behavior took its physical toll on him.

The sociologist Max Weber, writing at the turn of the twentieth century, argued that the death of a founding charismatic leader is always a blow to a movement.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes movements simply fold at this point, disappearing after a rather inglorious struggle. In other instances, there is an heir apparent — such as a son or someone who is genetically related — and the mantle is passed to this individual. Other times the charismatic founder appoints his successor, or alternatively, wise persons or magicians are called in to divine the will of the gods. The other option, however, is that the movement begins to institutionalize at this point and a bureaucratic leader emerges, often giving structure and order to a movement that otherwise was ruled by the power of charisma. Indeed, one might argue that in the history of Christianity Paul was the one to routinize the charisma of Jesus, formulating theological explanations of the founder's teachings and presiding over the evolution of ritual development and hierarchical structuring of a fast-growing movement.

Within the Vineyard there were pastors with considerable charisma to

16. For a discussion of the routinization of charisma, see S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). Also see my discussion of charisma in *Reinventing American Protestantism*, pp. 24-26.

whom the mantle might have been passed on the occasion of Wimber's death. The two most likely candidates, however, were no longer around in November of 1997. Tom Stipe, who had left the Calvary movement to join the Vineyard, had subsequently returned to the Calvary fold. And Brent Rue, pastor of another large Vineyard church, had died of cancer at a relatively young age. Knowing that his health was failing, Wimber indicated at a board meeting that Todd Hunter should be his successor, but at the time of his death he had still not laid hands on Hunter to pass the leadership mantle. Hence, when Wimber died there was a leadership void at the top of the Vineyard movement.

According to Hunter, whom I interviewed extensively about this transitional period, Wimber had been waiting for an appropriate moment to officially pass the torch. In the final months before his death, however, Wimber's mental faculties had dimmed, and Hunter says he did not want hands laid on him while in this condition, because people would question the appointment. Consequently, this led to the inevitable: a bureaucratic resolution of the leadership crisis.

In January of 1998 a special board meeting was called. According to Hunter, "I went to that meeting and poured out my heart and said, 'I'm not sure that I'm the right guy. My ego is not attached to this. I would be just as happy pastoring a church.'" But the answer came back, "No, you're the guy . . . we have no questions. You're it." And so Hunter's appointment as the national director was formalized at that meeting, concluding what was a logical bureaucratic transition, since he had been the national coordinator for several years.

Todd Hunter had also been the loyal "son" since early in the movement. He is a relatively young baby boomer who doesn't identify with the hippie movement, having missed the 1960s counterculture. For six months in 1979, Hunter and his wife Debbie served in an apprenticeship role under Wimber's ministry, and then left for Wheeling, West Virginia, where they planted their first church. In America's heartland, they helped start several additional churches, serving also as a regional pastoral coordinator in the Vineyard. Then in 1987 they returned to the Anaheim Vineyard, and for nearly five years Todd served as the senior associate pastor under Wimber at the "mother" church. In 1991 they moved to Virginia Beach, Virginia, where he pastored a Vineyard church and also earned his master's degree in biblical studies at Regent University. In 1994 they returned to Anaheim and Hunter became the national coordinator for the Association of Vineyard Churches.

## Todd Hunter's Desire for a Charismatic Moment

According to Max Weber's theory of the routinization of charisma, one would expect the Vineyard to move quickly into a more formalized and bureaucratized mode under Hunter's leadership, because by all accounts, including Hunter's own self-description, he was not a charismatic leader. However, Hunter had read Weber. Also, immediately upon his appointment, he began to consult various management experts, including a disciple of Peter Drucker as well as an experienced denominational head, Paul Sedar, of the Evangelical Free Church. After taking counsel from these "experts," Hunter did a radical thing. In a major policy decision, which is now known as the Columbus Accords, he eliminated all of the middle management in the Vineyard movement. Gone were the regional overseers, the district overseers, and the area coordinators. Instead, he created an extremely flat organizational structure which maintained only the area pastoral coordinators (APCs). There were fifty of them across the nation, and they answered directly to Hunter. There were no middlemen. The motive for this radical move of decentralization was to release what he called the "charismatic moment" in the movement, in which he hoped that a hundred John Wimbers would find their voice and thereby radicalize the Vineyard.

Operationally, Hunter communicated with these fifty APCs through E-mail and electronic distribution of policy and educational materials. Obviously, he was available for personal conversations, but he also believed that many issues and problems could be solved at a local level. If there was a problem with a pastor in one's area, then Hunter expected an APC to call another APC. If a solution could not be crafted, then they should call on a third APC. Hunter's view was that "if three of our best guys can't work something out, what is the chance that I will have the magic answer?" In terms of their job description, APCs were to care, coach, communicate, and coordinate. By *caring*, the APCs were to nurture the ten or so pastors they oversaw, developing deep relationships between and among them. The *coaching* aspect referred to the need to resource these pastors, providing them with information, but also serving as a role model. Their *communication* role was one of ensuring that pastors felt connected to the Vineyard and each other. And the *coordination* function came into play if there were disciplinary problems of any sort.

One of the radical things about Hunter's reorganization strategy was that he allowed pastors to pick their own APC. He sent out a survey to all pastors in the movement and asked them to name two or three people to whom they would like to relate, stressing that these should be people in whom they had confidence and with whom they enjoyed interacting. The process was not entirely democratic because Hunter took the information and made the final de-

cisions so that APCs would each have the same approximate number of pastors to oversee. But in only four or five cases (out of nearly five hundred) did he veto a pastor's choice.

Hunter's strategy — and it was a bold move on his part — was that middle management would get in the way of releasing "spiritual entrepreneurs" (his term). The inevitable tendency is for this intervening layer of bureaucracy to slow down innovation, said Hunter. What he desperately wanted to protect were pastors who would do the new thinking for the movement. And he took this step of decentralizing the Vineyard knowing that some people would oppose him because structure is comfortable. But Hunter's view was that these pastors would not leave the movement. They were not risk-takers. And precisely for that reason, they would also not advance the movement. Hence, he believed that he should not be persuaded by their call for building the pyramid of organizational hierarchy.

The first response to the Columbus Accords was strong affirmation. In the liminal moment of transfer of authority, people typically fear that the new leader will seize control in an authoritarian manner. Hence, the warm reception to the Columbus Accords may have been the result of the movement breathing a collective sigh of relief when Hunter was appointed, precisely because they had gone through such wrenching challenges under Wimber's risk-taking leadership and now it was time to consolidate a bit, building their internal ranks. Initially, Hunter was in a honeymoon period. But the complaints started to come that he had tipped the scale too far in the direction of abolishing structure.

On the survey that was distributed to pastors in 1999, there was a wide range of responses to a question regarding how the Vineyard had changed since Wimber's death. One view was that many leaders had stepped up a notch, assuming more leadership. On the other end of the spectrum were individuals who said the Vineyard appeared rudderless. A common perception was that the leadership was now more decentralized, and that this was a good thing. One respondent said that "there has been a switch from one visible leader to an emphasis on the Vineyard's genetic code/values." Another pastor said the focus had moved away from the West Coast, and this is positive. Another respondent stated, "There is a new release of power; new people have been raised up." There was also a perception that there was now more emphasis on evangelism and church planting and less on "power" ministries of healing and deliverance.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many pastors responding to the survey felt that the Vineyard was changing well before Wimber died. Because of the period of Wimber's illness, one pastor indicated that there had been a progressive shift away from the *man* (Wimber) to the *values and theology* he modeled and

taught. On the other hand, somewhat cynically, one pastor said that “for several years before John’s death, the Vineyard was in a ‘play it safe’ mode. It is still there.”

### **Todd Hunter’s Resignation**

In May 2000 Hunter announced that he was resigning as national director in order to plant a church that would attract Gen-Xers and people with a postmodern mentality. In his place Berten Waggoner, senior pastor of the Vineyard Church of Sugar Land, Texas, was named acting national director. On the Vineyard Web site Hunter was quoted as saying, “If someone is to be an authentic follower of Jesus and pursue the ‘pearl of great price,’ they may be called upon to risk it all.”

When such resignations occur, there is always more occurring than meets the eye (or appears on the Vineyard Web site). My own analysis of the organizational transitions in the post-Wimber era is the following.

Wimber was a charismatic leader, and therefore Hunter had a difficult act to follow. Shortly after Hunter was appointed as national coordinator, a well-known Christian scholar told me that these transitions are always very difficult, implying that whoever was to follow Wimber would probably not last very long. It appears that he was prophetic. It seems that movements, whether Christian or secular, need to chew up and spit out a few successors to charismatic leaders before the followers/members realize that one cannot fill the shoes of the founding leader. Indeed, as Weber argues, many movements fold shortly after the charismatic leader dies. Those that do survive have two options: they can routinize by creating a bureaucratic and rational structure to manage the movement, or they can imbue a new leader with charisma.

Todd Hunter, however, pursued a sociologically novel approach. He did not seek to consolidate personal power by routinizing the movement. Instead, he attempted to remove the layers of bureaucracy that had crept into the movement, and through a radical act of decentralization of authority, he hoped a “charismatic moment” could be created within the movement in which a new level of spiritual entrepreneurship would be ignited, with many pastors in the Vineyard asserting their prophetic call. It was a noble experiment, even though it has seemingly failed. Hence one is drawn to ask why Hunter pursued this course of action.

First, as previously noted, Hunter had read Weber as well as consulted various organizational theorists, and he knew a lot about the deadening effects of routinization. For that reason, Hunter simply refused to go down that route.

Furthermore, as Wimber's protégé, it would not have been faithful to his mentor's vision to be a noninnovative movement overseer. Indeed, the course he is currently pursuing, namely, starting a ministry that targets a new population, is much more aligned with the spirit of Wimber, who believed that Christians must always be adjusting the model to fit the message, taking into account cultural changes that are occurring.

Secondly, Hunter is not Wimber. Hunter is a teacher, not a preacher or prophet. He doesn't like conflict, and usually tries to achieve consensus. Hence, when board members were not willing to bless his vision to start "a movement within the movement" that would tackle the problem of postmodernity — thereby creating a new model within the Vineyard — he chose to resign rather than fight to the end, which is something Wimber undoubtedly would not have done. In fact, Hunter was rather reflective in his comments to me, saying it is the "mad professor," not the university president, who should be thinking radical thoughts about the organization. Clearly Hunter views himself as an innovator and not an organizational manager.

Thirdly, Hunter had started to spell out his vision of a ministry to postmodern youth, and it scared some people within the Vineyard movement, particularly those who lean in a more fundamentalist direction. While Hunter insisted to me that his views remain evangelical to the core, and I have no reason to doubt him, the issues he was confronting in various youth conferences present radical challenges to orthodox models of apologetics because the younger generation is much more experiential in their attempts to validate truth. Evangelicalism is a product of modernist thought, not postmodern culture. Hence, things that Hunter said during these conferences would be taken out of context by individuals who were operating within the rationalistic, foundationalist, modernist approach to theology and apologetics.

Finally, there were individuals within the movement that wanted more structure, not less. They wanted more centralized leadership as well as regional oversight. At one level this is very understandable, since there are many small Vineyard churches led by pastors without much experience who feel lonely in their mission. The idea of further decentralizing the Vineyard organization was therefore not welcomed by them. Some pastors, even if they had denominational roots and had left their churches for the Vineyard because of the breath of fresh air that it introduced into their lives, nevertheless yearned for the good old days when fellow pastors rather than congregational members were their peer group.

Hence, without assessing blame as to whether Hunter was right or the board was correct in accepting his resignation, it is clear in retrospect that the fit was not appropriate. For some of the same reasons that Gulliksen left the

Vineyard, Hunter decided that his spiritual calling was not to be the CEO of a denomination. Hunter is a church planter and a pioneer, seeking to initiate a new model of ministry for a postmodern generation.

### Message, Model, and Market

In many ways Hunter is following more closely in Wimber's image by launching a new ministry than if he had chosen the path of being a denominational executive. Perhaps better than anyone in the movement, Hunter understood Wimber's views on the interplay between the *message*, *model*, and *market* of a religious movement. For Wimber the message was rooted in the biblical narrative and does not fundamentally change over time, although the questions it answers will inevitably be different depending on the issues confronting Christians at any particular point in human history. The model, on the other hand, should always be in flux. There is nothing sacred about clergy dressing in a particular way, or churches playing a particular type of music, or the body of Christ meeting in a certain type of physical structure. Furthermore, both ritual and organizational structures should change with the times. Finally, both message and model should always be responding to the market for Christianity, which is constantly changing as the culture changes.

On the basis of his church-consulting days, Wimber believed that too many churches were trying to apply sixteenth- and seventeenth-century models to the twentieth century. In his view this simply does not work, and consequently it is not surprising that many mainline churches are declining. Instead, one should always be trying to adjust the model to the market, and the message should always be responding to questions being asked in the current context. In fact, Wimber was ruthless in applying this insight to his own movement, believing that the Vineyard was out of sync with many people in their twenties and thirties. Several years before his death he told me: "In my mind the market is moving [referring to the Gen-X crowd]. Let's move with the market. If we don't call it Vineyard, we'll call it Orchard, or whatever other culture-current term there is. I don't care which church it is as long as it teaches the truth of the Word."

During this interview Wimber's brother-in-law, Bob Fulton — who is in charge of the Vineyard's multicultural and international churches — made an astute comment. He said the pastors in the Vineyard and Calvary movements with large ministries have a better, or at least equal, ability to exegete culture as they do Scripture. "They really know how to look at their culture and understand what makes it tick," he said. In Fulton's view, echoing Wimber's insight

about message, model, and market, these pastors “have an instinctual understanding of their culture and their brilliance is in packaging the teachings and the Scriptures in a way that is palatable to their culture.” Nevertheless, both Fulton and Wimber acknowledged during this interview that the Vineyard’s model and message are geared primarily to Anglo baby boomers and that either the Vineyard will evolve a new style of church that connects with the children of the boomers, or else it will not survive very long into the twenty-first century. Wimber told me somewhat emphatically that the jazz and rock melodies of current Vineyard music sound to Gen-Xers like Bach and Beethoven did to baby boomers. He felt that the current generation of Vineyard leaders had learned a lot about generational change in evolving the movement, and consequently “they won’t get caught by change without trying to respond to it.”

When I pressed Wimber on what a Gen-X church might look like, he speculated that it will probably have café tables rather than chairs in rows; there will be dancing as part of praise and worship; and the music will be “plugged” (i.e., heavy metal). In probing Hunter about the same issue, he said Xers have a deep hunger for spirituality, but they want it articulated in a way that isn’t “slick.” Gen-X worship will be “rawer,” and more authentic, in his view. It will be very relational as a compensation for the fractured families from which many of these young adults come. And truth will not be propositional. It will be verified experientially: tested by the community for its ability to transform the lives of people who feel lonely, isolated, and frightened by their economic prospects. In our postmodern world, Hunter feels that truth claims by Gen-Xers will be modest, expressed oftentimes in stories rather than propositions or doctrines.

When I pressed Hunter after his resignation about his vision for the church he will start, he was appropriately open-ended but also said it will not look like the 1960s Jesus movement. For example, he suspects that it will be less performance-oriented, with worship being focused not on what is happening on the stage, but in the hearts of the worshipping community. There will be fewer loud screaming guitars, he said, because people will be worshipping God with all the senses, not just that of hearing. In all likelihood, communion will be served weekly. Worship may become more liturgical. Dance, drama, and art will all be important. Indeed, the visual as well as tactile senses may come much more fully into play, and don’t be surprised, said Hunter, if you smell a little incense in the worship space or find this gathering of believers meeting in an abandoned main-line church with stained glass windows, thick granite walls, and tile floors.

It is too early to know if the Vineyard will be successful in reinventing itself. A non-Vineyard Gen-X church (Mars Hill) that is booming in Seattle is led by a young pastor who teaches through whole books of the Bible in one sermon, because that is the only way to tell the full-bodied narratives of people en-

countering God as they wrestle with the problems of lust, greed, anger, and self-interest. In this church, it is interesting to note that candles and various ritualistic elements are being reintroduced to worship, even though its music is a radical blend of contemporary sounds mixed with an occasional Gregorian chant. Culture obviously moves in cycles, and we may witness a revival of practices and spaces that embodied the spirits of ancient times. After all, this is a rootless generation that is seeking stability and connections with the past, however fleeting and individualist these desires may be.

### Assessing the Vineyard's Organizational Success

In some ways charismatic leaders get a disproportionate amount of attention in the literature on social movements. While they are often important in launching a movement, the routinization of their charisma is equally important — if the movement is to have any staying power. Bureaucracy is not just a necessary evil. It is essential as movements grow in size. On the other hand, it is also true that movements can get overly routinized — which often happens as they age — and then something dramatic needs to happen to recapture the original energizing insight and passion. Sometimes this occurs with schisms, and at other times a new prophet marches on to the scene and recasts the vision in a way that once again excites the imagination — typically of people who are alienated and not profiting from the existing social arrangements.

The Vineyard has lost its beloved John, its charismatic leader. That's inevitable. Charismatic leaders always die, and sometimes in untimely ways. When this occurs, the challenge is obviously to figure out how to evolve the movement, holding on to the original insight which drew people to it, but also realizing that as people age they often desire structure and comfort. They need more than bread, however — in spite of what Dostoyevsky's "Grand Inquisitor" said. They need to live by *faith*, if the Christian message is going to mean anything at all.

With this as context, it is not all that complicated to figure out why the Vineyard has grown in such a mercurial fashion. The mainline denominations didn't understand the culture, and they created a vacuum into which movements like the Vineyard, Calvary Chapel, and a whole host of other "new paradigm" churches could move. Wimber's several years as a church consultant taught him what was wrong in the mainline. In fact, he probably didn't need to visit two thousand churches as a consultant to inform his analysis. A couple of hundred would have been enough. After all, Wimber was a jazz musician. He knew how to improvise and he knew how to read an audience. In this case the audience was middle-class America. Having been a pagan, he knew how to

communicate with non-Christians, and it was in their language — the language of music and understated rhetoric — that he preached the gospel. Charisma for baby boomers did not require shouting and yelling. It meant being honest and vulnerable, and sharing from the gut. It also meant invoking the Spirit, which had all but evaporated in the bottom line of corporate business. And it meant offering a little healing to a generation of people that had really beat themselves up as they destroyed some of our most treasured institutions, such as the family. In this regard, it is no wonder that the Vineyard practiced deliverance. There were a lot of demons to banish, with some of them residing in hurt, wounded, and abused people.

While some people may criticize Wimber for being too authoritarian, it takes a strong, risk-taking leader to break from the chains of the dominant culture. Undoubtedly some people were alienated in the process, because more than a few folks have left the Vineyard — with some of them returning to the safety of the Calvary Chapel fold. But then, there are not too many genuine innovators that don't leave a few bodies in their wake. The path to innovation is seldom a straight one. If it were that easy, more people would figure it out. So Wimber and his ilk of leaders often make mistakes before they get it right, but on the other hand they are willing to break with convention. Cultural innovators march to a different drummer, and Wimber claimed his inspiration to be the Holy Spirit.

The real genius of Wimber, however, may have been fueled by the fact that he was a businessman before the Lord got ahold of him. He understood markets and models and only had to add the message to his repertoire. Hunter, on the other hand, was faced with a different problem. This “son” was wise enough not to try to compete with the father. But he also was a risk-taker, attempting to create a “charismatic moment” within the movement, although, as it turned out, this was even harder than being a charismatic leader.

What does it mean for the Spirit to break through into a movement of five hundred churches? Can there be a hundred mini-Wimbers, all transforming the Vineyard simultaneously? The conventional answer is no. The candle must go out at some point, and the honorable thing is not to postpone the agony, but simply to get on with the second generation of the movement. In short, bureaucratic common sense suggests that one should get more comfortable with the values of the dominant culture, polish up the performative elements of the ritual, make a little money on the CDs, and take longer and more expensive vacations. Hunter, however, puts the situation more charitably. He says the Vineyard is at the “end of the beginning.” In his view the honeymoon is over and now it is time to raise the kids, take out the trash, and pay down the mortgage — or whatever is the organizational equivalent of these acts.

## Preserving the Genetic Code

When I asked Hunter if the Vineyard was a denomination, he equivocated. In some ways it lacks the traditional markers of a denomination, he said. For example, according to Hunter, the Association of Vineyard Churches does not ordain (this is done at a local level); it doesn't own property (the individual churches do); it doesn't have paid bishops (just area pastoral coordinators, who themselves are pastors); it doesn't have a centralized pension plan (one better have a well-employed spouse!); and there is no centralized health insurance (hopefully some future political administration will solve that one). Nevertheless, Hunter thinks that denominationalism is probably inevitable.

Given his resignation, perhaps the following comments are no longer relevant, because we asked pastors on our survey what advice they had for Hunter. However, the comments may have a prophetic quality to them. One Vineyard pastor said, "Put a few cosmic, spontaneous, visionary, new paradigm brothers at the top." Another said, "Surround yourself with wise, faithful, and dreaming men." And one pastor advised: "Be willing to get out of the boat and walk on the water with Jesus." These admonitions were mixed with sage advice about "keeping the heart of a servant" and maintaining a balance between the "best of evangelicalism" and the "best of Pentecostalism." One pastor clearly thought Todd had been reading too many management books and said, "Stop trying to figure out the right structure and build relationships."

## Conclusion

The Vineyard Christian Fellowship represents a different genre of religious organization than do the Methodists or Episcopalians. The Vineyard is part of a "new paradigm" of independent churches and church movements that are deeply suspicious of religious denominations, even though, like the Vineyard, many of these groups are in the process of evolving toward quasi-denominational status. These new paradigm churches prefer to identify themselves as "movements" or networks of affiliated churches.<sup>17</sup> Some of them even go so far as to proclaim that they are part of a postdenominational era in American Christianity, which eschews any centralized organizational structure or control.

In addition to their decentralized organizational structures, these new

17. The first attempt to convene religious leaders representing this movement was by C. Peter Wagner in a conference held at Fuller Theological Seminary, "The National Symposium on the Postdenominational Church," May 21-23, 1996.

paradigm churches are pioneering a revolution in worship style and form. Unlike the reformation led by Martin Luther, the current revolution in American religious practice, which is represented by church movements such as the Vineyard, is challenging not *doctrine* but the *medium* through which the message of Christianity is articulated. Like upstart religious groups of the past, these churches are progressively stripping market share from the mainline denominations. Appropriating contemporary cultural forms, they are creating a new genre of worship music, restructuring the organizational character of institutional religion, and democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers.

The issue facing the Vineyard at the present time is whether it will continue to innovate or settle into a comfortable period of maturation. Hunter is not certain what he will call his new church. He is going to invite the people to name it. And it is not clear to me whether this church pioneer will keep his flock within the corral of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship. After all, the Vineyard needed to separate from Calvary Chapel in order to establish a distinct and authentic ministry. Likewise, a ministry to postmodern people may not fit within the fold of a movement built on the foundation of evangelicalism, which is part of the “modern” as opposed to postmodern culture.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it is not clear what the future growth of the Vineyard movement will be — not because it lacks charismatic leadership, but because it has done its job too well, and now there are many Vineyard clones, including not a few within mainline churches. Hence, the distinctiveness of the Vineyard product has been diminished. One no longer needs to sneak out on Sunday evenings to a Vineyard worship service to hear contemporary music or experience the healing power of the Holy Spirit. The spiritual marketplace is more crowded with contemporary worship forms than it was two decades ago. What is only beginning to emerge, however, is a church for the children and grandchildren of the baby boom generation.

18. See the discussion of postmodern religion in Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller, eds., *GenX Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000).