

September 15, 2004

Dear Fellow Vineyard Pastors,

This letter has two authors with one purpose. The first part is a collaborative effort edited by Peter Fitch, the latter part was written by myself, Don Rousu. Please read this material when you have sufficient time to give it thoughtful and prayerful consideration. Things are not always what they seem. This is not junk mail! There are things here that you need to know well in advance of our fall regional gatherings. We are also inviting your feedback before we come together in the fall. Everyone must have a voice in this process.

**An Invitation to Growth:
Recommendations of the
Theological Task Force
Of Vineyard Churches Canada
July, 2004
By Peter Fitch**

This summer, for 3 days in late July, 4 pastors with special interest in theological development (one from each region of the country) met in Vancouver to begin the task of developing a plan to standardize expectations for academic requirements for Vineyard pastors in Canada.

Joe Kelder from BC, Don Rousu from Alberta (Task Force Leader), John McCallum from Ontario, and Peter Fitch from New Brunswick represented their various regions to confer about known courses and texts, and to propose a workable plan for theological mentoring. Each of the 4 have a passion for theological education and a heart for charting an effective path forward that will strengthen and encourage our churches and pastors. Here is the essence of their deliberations and their recommendations:

The Vineyard around the world has generally opted for an apprentice-model of preparation for ministry rather than requiring a set number of courses or degrees from a seminary or Bible college. The Task Force felt that this approach has both advantages and pitfalls. The big advantage is that gifted people of excellent character who have not had the opportunity to do formal theological study have still had an open door to enter pastoral ministry. We believe that this is as it should be. However, there is a somewhat hidden disadvantage of being without planned theological preparation for ministry. Over the longer term, good theology is critical to the health and balance of both the pastor and the

congregation. Difficulties, conflicts, lack of positive growth and many of the challenging issues in church life will frequently have theological roots. Obviously good theology doesn't automatically make everything run perfectly, but it can keep you on the right road and help you to avoid or diminish the negative impact of things that come your way.

While there was a determination to continue with the freedom that the apprentice-model allows, there was also a strong desire to establish minimal standards of theological education for future leaders. We believe that a foundational understanding of exegesis, hermeneutics, Biblical knowledge, history, pastoral care, systematic theology, and counselling does not necessarily require 3 or 4 years [or 6-8 years, as is often the case in mainline denominations) of full-time study at university, Bible college, or seminary. But we do believe that Canadian Vineyard pastors ought to have a certain level of foundational understanding in all of these areas. Therefore, we have defined these standards so that we can all have an agreed upon body of knowledge that must be mastered by those that will lead our churches.

We have also formulated a plan for training future and current church leaders in a way that can be applied according to the needs and circumstances of each individual.

First of all, 4 categories of theology were identified: Exegetical, Systematic (including basic Biblical knowledge), Historical, and Practical. Next, a four year plan was established (including our recommendations for textbooks, correspondence courses, and assignments) whereby some advance would be made in each category each year. This is what we call "the settler approach" because in the first year settlers prepare just enough food, fuel, clothes and shelter to get by for that year. They do a little of everything, but not too much of any one thing. The next year, they build on that foundation to enlarge their shelter, their food supply, their fuel base, their wardrobe, and anything else they might need.

In line with this, it was agreed that people who were otherwise prepared (in terms of character, gifting, relationship, understanding of Vineyard values, etc.) could be allowed to begin a church plant part-way through a process of theological development. It was also agreed that the pace of advance could be flexible if necessary but that the standard of knowledge ought to be upheld.

We recommend that each church or each cluster of churches determine a person that will evaluate, mentor, and monitor future leaders as they progress through these materials.

We also recommend that current pastors undertake a process of

self-evaluation to determine how much of this material is lacking in their own background and then make it up (We believe it is up to each pastor to decide for him or herself about equivalencies of knowledge, that is, if a person has read a different textbook on Church History than the one that is suggested in our plan, he or she can determine whether or not it is an adequate substitution).

We agree to establish a team of people who have a passion for theological education in each region. Members of these teams will meet with current pastors and try to establish with them a program for their own personal development. Pastors, after assessing their own areas of need in light of the standards of knowledge, will be invited to determine a plan for going forward according to their own sense of how much time they can contribute to this task.

We recommend that each pastor join with one or two other pastors in his or her cluster of churches and make an agreement to discuss materials in regular intervals (perhaps once every 2 months). This can be done even if the individuals are studying different materials. The best (and worst) ideas from each book or course can be shared together and will hopefully lead into rich dialogues about theological understanding and the practical needs of ministry. We also recommend that some time be given in regional meetings each year for pastors to make short reports about the value of the materials they have absorbed.

While we acknowledge that most of our pastors are doing a great job already, we also believe that it is self-evident that pastors need to grow. We all need to become better speakers, better exegetes, better counsellors, better decision-makers, and better trainers. We fully expect this approach to help. To us, it seems in line with a normal Vineyard perspective, a *radical middle* in relation to theological education. We are looking for the place in between enforced study for a prescribed period of time in a central place (seminary) and an “anything goes” approach. If it encourages our pastors and interns in the pursuit of becoming life-long and self-motivated learners, it will bear fruit that will last forever in their own lives as well as in the lives of the people that they shepherd.

“Theology Is . . .” **by Don Rousu**

Theology is faith . . .

When our theological development group met for three days in mid-July (2004), we asked some basic, fundamental questions. One of those questions was simply this: “What is theology?” One of our members, Peter Fitch, has done a lot of thinking about that question and had a ready answer: “Theology is faith seeking understanding --- in an authentic way.” It gripped us, and we have adopted that definition.

Theology is . . . art . . .

We believe that everyone thinks theologically. The only question is whether it is good theology or bad. Two thousand years of church history have given us some proven parameters for good theology: Scripture, Faith, Tradition, and Sound Reason. Thinking theologically is a dynamic process, like the development of an artist. One only becomes a great artist through much practice of the art within a community of master artists. The same is true of this art called theology. Our theology clearly determines the way we pastor people and, as Gregory the Great, the acknowledged authority on pastoral care for over a thousand years said, “The government of souls [pastoring] is the art of arts.”

Theology is important

“If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth (Jer. 15:19),” says the Lord. We recognize that spiritual leadership in the church can be an onerous task. (James 3:1,2) Because of that, we desire to provide the essential theological building blocks to give people of good character and great spiritual gifting the biblical foundation they need to do the work with excellence, “rightly dividing the Word of truth (II Tim 2:15).”

While we believe that the most important preparation for pastoral ministry is done in the context of dynamic ministry within the local church, we also recognize that most local churches have not had the necessary resources to do serious theological training. In the same way that you want your dentist or your surgeon to have a reservoir of knowledge beyond the immediate procedures being done on you, so it is also important for those entrusted with theological leadership in the church to operate from a similarly large reservoir. No one understands better than a seasoned practitioner how demanding and challenging the

pastoral ministry is. In providing this entryway into theological training, we want to give everyone the best possible opportunity to not only survive, but flourish and succeed.

A Workable Path for Theological Training

If it were possible, we would recommend that every person in the Canadian Vineyard requiring theological training would seek it at St. Stephen's University (SSU) in New Brunswick, where we already have a formal agreement. SSU has developed a program of studies that gives careful attention to character formation within a dynamic Christian community, expressions of ministry done in the local church, and significant learning experiences in a cross-cultural setting. We also recognize that not everyone is able to afford the time and money necessary to pursue that course. Because of that, we have developed a course of studies that can be pursued in the context of the local church at a pace set by the student and at a very low financial cost.

We are not attempting to provide, through our curriculum, a complete theological education. What we wish to provide are the essential building blocks of a theological education. When those essentials have been covered, then we are prepared to offer further direction. In the same way that the human body needs the essential amino acids to synthesize complete protein, so we believe that once a person has the theological essentials, then they will know how to synthesize the rest on their own. What we want to stimulate is a lifelong love for learning. And together, we want to promote a "culture of growth," complete and well-rounded growth. As the Canadian Vineyard develops schools for discipleship, leadership, and church planting, this component will take its proper place.

In the grand scheme of things, we want to provide resources that will enable you, in your local situation, to develop a plan that is workable for you and those you seek to train. For example, people who live in larger metropolitan areas may be able to take some courses [church history, hermeneutics, exegesis, biblical languages) at a local bible college or seminary, and supplement the rest with three or four elements from our curriculum that we deem essential for ministry in the Vineyard. We are referring especially to our course materials on the Kingdom of God.

We want to say, unequivocally, that what you do as a pastor every day is critically important beyond all human recognition. You have been entrusted with nothing less than the eternal destiny of peoples' lives. You require and deserve the best training you can possibly get.

Raising Up Your Successor

Something equally crucial is the fact that you, as a Vineyard pastor, are entrusted with the responsibility of raising up your own successor. If you resign, become disabled, or suddenly die, who is ready in your local church to fill the gap, take the reins, and be the next pastor? We do not have a reservoir of trained people who can suddenly step in. We do not have a denominational system with bible colleges and seminaries. Existing pastors, in concert with one another, must do this task of preparing people for ministry, including sound theological training. The theological dimension of the task is do-able, but it requires foresight, planning, and intentionality. To that end, we offer this invitation to growth. We want to enable and empower you to do theological training within the context of a resourceful and supportive community, the Canadian Vineyard.

We recognize that this is not going to be an easy task for any of us. It is always easy to react to what is presently at hand, and much harder to do the important things that ensure a healthy future. This will require a wide consensus to succeed. In order to move ahead and invest in our future, we need to agree that this is important, absolutely essential to our health and survival, and worth doing well.

In anticipation of fall gatherings in each of our regions, we present this plan for your consideration. Having laid the foundation, we now invite your evaluation of what we have done thus far. Please begin right away to offer your feedback. Direct your comments, observations, suggestions, or questions to the person in your region who is currently serving you on the theological task force:

B.C. Region, Joe Kelder
Prairie Region, Don Rousu
Ontario Region, John McCallum
Atlantic Region, Peter Fitch

On behalf of the Theological Task Force, our Warmest Greetings,

