

Dearest Vineyard Canada Community,

We have had quite the journey since the National Team released the “Pastoral Letter of 2014.”

It has been a very full five years recalibrating right across the movement. During this rewarding and challenging season, amongst the myriad of other things we have been developing and working on, we have identified two key areas that have needed clarification. The first has been our understanding and application of leadership within an organization. This has required a lot of reflection, study and reiteration over these last five years. For a refresher on who comprises the National Team and how our systems of governance function, our “Why Vineyard? - An Introduction” document, released in the fall of last year, will help you understand how we are currently operating ([Click here for "Why Vineyard?"](#)) The second has been how we can best serve our movement in navigating the shifting sands, both in the culture and within the Church world, around human sexuality and marriage.

The National Team has undertaken a process over these past years to co-discern together how the Lord is leading us. The challenging, and yet beautiful, realities of creating a space of co-discernment is that it is not based on the model of “the majority wins”, but rather “what do we believe is the best way forward.” This allows for differences of opinions and perspectives to coalesce into a discerning space for “the way” rather than simply landing in positional unanimity. This certainly has been our journey. Through this process it has been made quite clear that both our National Team and our Canadian family is incredibly diverse. What you will see reflected here is what our NT has seen as the way forward for us. This comes from a place of holding the tension of various perspectives within the team, yet still coming to a place of agreement as to what our best way forward is for Vineyard Canada. Joyce Rees has put together a personal reflection on what this journey together has been like for us. If you’d like a bit more insight as to what our process has been give it a look. ([Click here for Joyce's Reflection](#))

Richard Rohr reminds us in a recent post that in a certain schema, “We supposedly know what God is going to say or do next, because we think our particular denomination has it all figured out.” This is not how Vineyard Canada is positioned and certainly is not what we have been reaching for in our ongoing and recent discernment process. We are simply discerning what our next steps of obedience are in following Jesus, as just one part of His Church, fully knowing that we do not have it all figured out. We will only find breath and freedom to be who we are in the body of Christ as we embrace an ecclesiology that “loves the whole Church” knowing that Jesus is the Head. The centre. Our source.

Vineyard is not the whole Church, nor is it our place to police her. We are but one part and must be faithful to who we are called to be together. Recognizing we are a “small c church” in the context of the “large C Church”, we do however, carry an understanding of our posture and practices that are unique. Not better. Not more valuable. But unique. What one of our early Vineyard theologians, Don Williams, called our “sacred trust.”

Given this robust ecclesiology, a key understanding then, in how our local churches, and consequently each of our International Association of Vineyard Churches, develop within the “large C Church” reality, is that of the “centred set.” In general terms, we experience ‘belonging’ in the Vineyard through having a “shared centre”. We share a common direction and purpose which holds us together, rather than a “bounded set” of theological tenants. Paul Hiebert’s writings are very informative on this understanding and deeply impacted John Wimber, and consequently our entire movement. This has been our posture.

It’s worth inserting here an excerpt from Vineyard Canada’s pastoral letter of 2014:

*This “Centre” is not a set of theological or ethical statements, although these can be helpful to describe it. Rather, it is an encounter with the radical embrace of God, revealed through Christ’s life and death on the cross, resurrection and ascension, made real to us by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. This encounter includes an ongoing invitation to live out what it means to, together with God, extend that embrace to all. This is what has brought us together; for while we come from many different theological, ecclesial, and cultural backgrounds, we also come from a common place of needing God’s mercy and receiving it. [...] we do this to avoid that “over realized eschatology” that prematurely determines “who’s in and who’s out.”*

So, we hold a “small c centre” which describes our theological perspective and values, for the purpose of calibrating our path of obedience in following Jesus, fully understanding that the “large C Centre” of the whole Church is now and forever Jesus alone. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. All we can say is, as did Paul, “follow me as I follow Christ.”

We are at a juncture where we believe our understanding of sexuality and human flourishing has enough of an impact on our theology, pastoral care and discerning of the Spirit’s work, that it informs our *centre* as a community of communities. Having said that, the beauty of the centred set posture is that we can still hold diversity of perspective and dis-agreement at a personal and local church level. We do not want to silence anyone. However, sometimes in a movement such as ours, we release a measure of our autonomy for the sake of community. This isn’t blind loyalty to the institution but a commitment that we will be “better together” in the ongoing, life-long discovery of what it means to follow Jesus. This allows for a gracious posture that if, and when, there are those that feel they cannot flourish in their faith as part of the Vineyard any longer, and their obedience to Christ has them finding a different space within the “large C Church”, there is release. No stones. No curses. Freedom. When one can no longer follow with us, as we follow Jesus, we must let them find their way into a new expression of community in which they believe they can flourish.

It is our purpose here to give you a summary version of where we have landed as a National Team regarding human sexuality and the implications on our licensing procedures. Just as we have done historically, e.g. our perspective on women in ministry, there will be a more in-depth document coming. We wanted to get this summary to you ASAP however, without waiting for the more in-depth version to be complete.

There is much we have learned. We have been stretched both intellectually and in compassion and understanding. Therefore, it is not enough to simply re-issue the 2014 letter. We recommend listening to session 9 of the Round Tables ... click [HERE](#) ... as it will give you a good starting place for the kinds of things that we will be tackling in our long version of where we are at. One other note. In our initial road map that we laid out in September, our intent was to release an “open letter” to the queer community acknowledging the pain created for many by our lack of understanding and empathy, asking for forgiveness. We received a lot of critique for taking a step like that at that time, particularly from sexual minorities, and we listened to their counsel and did not do such a release. We are still in a posture of enquiry regarding such a step. We need wisdom.

### **The Summary:**

- We will not be changing our historic position on marriage, as laid out in the 2014 Pastoral Letter released by the National Team of Vineyard Canada. Vineyard Canada remains committed to an understanding of Christian marriage as an exclusive, covenantal

relationship between one man and one woman, consistent with traditional understanding of the Biblical witness and the historical church. As a result, we will not be licensing anyone to perform same sex marriage ceremonies, whether for temporary usage or full certification.

- We do not believe that in and of itself a non-heterosexual orientation is sin. We do believe that there are those who will continue to have a non-heterosexual orientation throughout their lives, and this in and of itself does not disqualify them from participation in the life of the community. Where there has been ignorance about and ostracism of people, young and old, who do not have heterosexual orientation, we believe that the way of Jesus calls us to a better way of embracing all people as God's children as we invite them to the journey of following Christ. People with same-sex attraction who are gifted for pastoral leadership are blessed to do so, as long as they are living celibate lives or have chosen a heterosexual marriage. It will be at the discretion of each local church what the pathways for discipleship and leadership development look like within each community. This will be a significant area that we will need to tackle in depth in our long form document.
- We acknowledge that there are outstanding questions that need to be addressed about gender minorities, including people who identify as transgender or non-binary, in the life of the church. We recognize that questions connected with gender are distinct from questions involving sexual orientation, and they deserve to be addressed directly and distinctly.
- We call each of our local Vineyards to never lose the capacity, grace, or pacing to intentionally walk with individuals, particularly regarding sexuality. The need to listen and engage with each story is critical. Though we have landed with a clear policy regarding our licensing, this is no way robust enough to provide guidance at the grass roots level of care and leadership development. This will be a significant area that we will need to tackle in depth in the long form document.
- We are committed to an ongoing process of providing resource and support to our local churches as they navigate the inevitable and ongoing challenges regarding sexuality in our churches and culture.
- Through this time of discernment, we have concluded that it is not a practically viable option for our movement to allow a diversity of practice regarding officiating same sex marriages or licensing people in same sex marriages for pastoral ministry. Having stated this, however, our commitment is to not hold those holding different convictions in a category of heresy, nor do we insist that all must think alike.
- We recognize some may need to separate from us in order to follow their conscience and convictions. This is hard, and painful, but we trust that the Lord has all of our backs and we can trust him with the future.
- We are committed to minimizing relational fallout. Our appeal to our pastors and leaders is that if people exit their communities as a result of our decision, that they act with grace and kindness and release them compassionately and with care. It is our hope that if local Vineyards, and/or networks of the same, decide to not follow our lead, that we will jointly release each other and find some way of expressing mutual respect and agreement upon separating. We desire to maintain friendship. We hold out for the belief that a separating of

ways does not require a “cutting off” of relationship.

- We request that anyone stepping away from the Canadian Vineyard at this juncture cease using the name “Vineyard” as to avoid confusion not just within our own country but with our International Community of Vineyard Churches as well.

We trust that this gives enough clarity for you at this stage as we continue to work on further documents that will unpack in a more robust way how we are walking this out together. Where our 2014 pastoral letter requested that pastors not perform same sex ceremonies until our process was complete, we can now say that we have arrived at a conclusion and our communal discernment has landed on this as a policy. The Foundations Team is accessible and available to answer any questions you may still have regarding our landing place.

As we thoughtfully, prayerfully and responsibly walk out our obedience to Jesus together, let us never lose this posture of mutual love as members of Christ's Body despite differences, in recognition of our shared experience of His grace. Let the kingdom come.

David and Anita Ruis