

“For Waters Shall Break Forth in the Wilderness”

Healing Generation X at the Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Cambridge

Scott Sang-Hyun Lee

Introduction

Today, the Association of Vineyard Churches is one of the fastest growing church-planting movements in the world. Modestly launched with the founding of a small Los Angeles fellowship in 1974, the Vineyard movement now boasts 850 churches worldwide, with over 500 in the United States alone.¹

This case study on religious healing in Boston centers on one such church: the Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Cambridge. Established just three years ago, the Cambridge Vineyard—as it is called by its members—gathers for worship in an elementary school gymnasium. On any given Sunday morning, only a simple banner draped across the front fence indicates to passersby that this is indeed a religious gathering rather than a poorly scheduled PTA meeting. The banner reads, in block letters:

Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Cambridge.
Practical. Spiritual. Fun.

Before the morning service begins, early arrivals chat in the school foyer—turned—church café while sidestepping intrepid toddlers navigating the sea of adults. Wearing one’s “Sunday best” is not the custom of the place for this laid-back crowd, most of whom are in their twenties and thirties. On a mild spring day, many wear jeans and T-shirts; the swankier among them wear slacks and a dress shirt or blouse. In stark contrast to the rarified attire of leaders in many other denominations, the pastor himself wears a staid khaki-pants-and-buttoned-shirt combo. Moreover, the pastor prefers to be addressed by his first name, Dave, rather than by an honorific title typically afforded to religious leaders.

As people mingle in the foyer, a small army of loyal volunteers transforms the cavernous gym into a surprisingly functional sanctuary—complete with a raised stage, a public address system, and a seating capacity of 300. The churchgoers gradually trickle into the gym and take their seats. The sitting, how-

ever, is short-lived for, once the worship music begins, the congregants rise to their feet to join in the singing. Led by a band comprised of vocalists, guitarists, keyboardists, a drummer, and a percussionist, the worship music sounds very much like contemporary popular music and not at all like a centuries-old hymn. To a first-time visitor, then, the impression of the church has suddenly changed from that of a PTA meeting to that of a rock concert.

PTA meeting, rock concert, school gym, blue jeans and a T-shirt: all have thoroughly mundane connotations—not in any pejorative sense, but merely insofar as they represent aspects of everyday life, as opposed to the traditional holiness of a church service. Based upon these first impressions, one might characterize the Cambridge Vineyard as a church that appeals to the “Generation X” age group by virtue of the accessibility of its liturgy, the familiarity of its style of worship, the flexibility of its social norms, and the relative equality of its social positions. In short, the church immediately satisfies two of its three self-proclaimed central qualities: “practical” and “fun.” For the same reasons, however, the third, central quality—“spiritual”—seems an odd description for this church.

By focusing my attention on the church’s prayer ministry team, I determined what was not immediately apparent: that not only do the church members actively engage in spiritual matters, but they do so in the specific context of healing—a surprising fact, considering the church members are young, prosperous, and relatively healthy. The conclusions that I draw from this study—though tentative—nonetheless suggest that religious healing is anything but a phenomenon to be found only in marginal communities and among older individuals. Rather, healing occupies a central space in the thought and life of the Cambridge Vineyard. To quote the pastor himself: at the Cambridge Vineyard, healing is simply “part of what life with being with God is about.”

The Prayer Ministry Team and Healing

The prayer ministry team at the Cambridge Vineyard is a group of church members whose responsibility it is to intercede on behalf of those who request prayer for specific issues—be they physical, emotional, relational, psychological, moral, intellectual.

Though not officially confined to healing aspects, the belief in the power of the Holy Spirit to heal people permeates the thought and practice of the prayer ministry team. The church's implicit theology of healing categorizes healing prayer into three types, each of which identifies the root nature of a problem in need of healing: inner healing, physical healing, and deliverance prayer. Perhaps the most striking, by virtue of its sensationalist implications, deliverance prayer addresses psychological and physical symptoms that result from the possession of demonic spirits. However, I must only acknowledge this belief in the demonic, for an even superficial description would far exceed the limited space of a brief paper.

The prayer ministry team is comprised of approximately fifty lay members, though during any given service, only about fifteen are officially “on duty.” As for the role of the team member, one woman is quick to identify the agent of healing:

I wouldn't . . . describe the people praying over a person as a “healer”; I'd be more comfortable with the term “intercessor,” assuming that God is the only one who can heal, and all we're doing is asking God to do it.

During Sunday services, the attendant team members gather in the back corner of the gym and, for the majority of the service they possess a social status no different from the other congregants. Toward the end of the service, however, when the worship band retakes the stage to lead the congregation in an extended time of praise and worship, the prayer team's services are put to use. As the music begins, the pastor usually invites anyone who desires to receive healing to visit the prayer team. Accordingly, various members of the congregation leave their seats, walk to the back of the gym, and approach an available team member, usually one of the same gender. After initial greetings, the congregant explains the issue for which he or she desires prayer. Many people request prayer for physical illness, ranging from all-too-familiar chronic diseases to sudden and perhaps mysterious ailments. Just as often, however, the congregant requests prayer for an emotional problem.

After discussing the prayer request, the team member prays directly for the congregant. The manner of this prayer varies greatly from team member

to team member and from case to case, but a general model would include some form of physical contact between team member and congregant. On average, the prayer session lasts for just a few minutes, though some last the duration of the time in which the band is leading the congregation in praise and worship—generally twenty to thirty minutes. After the team member has finished praying for the congregant, the two consult as to what they may have felt occur during the prayer. For physical healing prayers, many congregants immediately feel changes in their condition, and those receiving inner healing prayer often report feeling at peace with themselves. After discussing any changes, the two exchange a hug and kind words, and the congregant returns to his or her seat.

Implications and Analysis

Admittedly, the foregoing description generalizes the many encounters between team member and congregant that occur every Sunday. However, as a model, the paradigm of healing that I have set forth facilitates several theoretical and practical conclusions.

First, I should note that, while healing explicitly occurs in the context of the prayer ministry, the theme of healing can be found in virtually every aspect of church life. For example, during a sermon on the topic of “receiving God's love,” the pastor's wife, Grace, cites the biblical passage to which I owe the title of this paper:

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water.
(Isaiah 35:6–7)

In her sermon, Grace likens “this dramatic picture of abundance, of streams flowing forth,” to the experience of God's love, and this rain of his love can occur only through repeated healing prayer. Later in the sermon, Grace invites the congregation to participate immediately in the healing process:

I just want to encourage you to go ahead and raise your hand to God right now. Raise your hand up high, just as a way of confessing to him that, yes, this has been hard for you, and you are asking him to come and heal and free up your receptive faculties in order to receive more from him. Let me pray for you. . . .

Finally, in a blessing to the congregation that concludes the sermon, she appeals to a holistic understanding of healing:

Be made whole. Be healed and respond to the willing love of the Lord, and to his very presence. Again, body of

Christ, I bless you, receive the love and the affectionate desire of the Lord for you.

Thus, the path to an intimate relationship with God leads not through exertion or sincerity or devotion, but through the healing of the brokenness of the human soul.

The worship music also expresses the motif of healing, as is the case in the lyrics to a praise song sung passionately by the congregation during one Sunday service:

I'm trading my sickness.
I'm trading my pain.
I'm laying them down,
For the joy of the Lord.²

Here, the dynamic relationship of mind and body is especially salient; physical “sickness” and “pain” can be overcome when one “trades” them for the emotional mountaintop that is the “joy of the Lord.”

In addition to its ubiquity, the practice of healing at the Cambridge Vineyard assumes strong egalitarian and individualistic principles. Unlike some traditions, in which a designated holy person solely assumes the task of healing, at the Cambridge Vineyard, any member of the church can theoretically become involved with the prayer team (though there is a training process that one must complete). Even in the act of prayer itself, the team members express an array of idiosyncrasies. Without a well-defined, formalized ritual procedure, both the team members and the congregants are free to experiment with and improvise their prayer sessions. Moreover, note that only a small purple placard distinguishes the prayer team member, thus neutralizing the expected asymmetrical power dynamic between the team member and the congregant. Indeed, on several occasions, I have witnessed team members themselves receiving prayer from congregants.

A third characteristic of the spirituality of healing at the Cambridge Vineyard is that it actively engages the participation of men. For example, a multiweek discussion group called “Cross Currents” serves as an “open, Christ-centered support group for men seeking truth and grace in their sexuality and relationships.” While many churches have women’s support groups (as does Cambridge Vineyard), the presence of a specifically men’s group indicates a recognition of the brokenness of both men and women, and of their subsequent need to be healed. During Sunday services, male congregants often pair together with male members of the prayer team. In a culture that tends to eroticize physical contact between males, these individuals willingly make such contact—a patently counter-cultural

expression of men’s vulnerability and intimacy.

Finally, and perhaps most relevantly for an academic study, the exceptional educational and professional profile makes the church’s heavy involvement in healing phenomena especially surprising and confounding. More than 30 percent of the church members are currently in school, and many of the remaining 70 percent are now only in their first or second jobs—an indication of their recent entry into the workforce. Of the nine members of the prayer team I interviewed for this study, all are college graduates, six have or are currently pursuing advanced degrees, and the represented professions include: internet start-up founder, software developer, journalist, writer, psychiatric nurse, and physician. If this profile is at all representative, one could draw the conclusion that the members of the church have directly encountered an academic subculture that valorizes science, reason, and intellect and devalues subjective experience, the supernatural, and often religion itself. The church leadership apparently agrees with this assessment, as Grace acknowledges that “in some ways, we feel uniquely called to minister to Cantabrigian types, who have tended to live more in their heads.”

How do individuals steeped in an academic liberalism that attempts to scientifically understand reality embrace the seemingly antirational quality of religious healing? Asked how, exactly, the healing occurs, Pastor Dave—himself a graduate of one of the most prestigious universities in the country—offers a profoundly simple response:

I think I can rationally explain it by saying, you’ve got God here [holds left hand high], you’ve got us here [holds right hand at chest level], and you’ve got the Holy Spirit between us who offers us power, and you’ve got the sick person, and they get better. That’s the only mechanism I can say.

Academics might challenge—if not dismiss—such an easy explanation as irrational. However, I suspect that Dave and the members of the Cambridge Vineyard would counter that mechanisms, theories, and abstractions are ultimately secondary to the actual healing that occurs. Beyond intellectual technicalities and theological minutiae, the simple fact that “they get better” is sufficient for their practical and fun spirituality.

Notes

1. “History of the Vineyard Movement,” official Vineyard USA web site (2000), <http://www.vineyardusa.org/about/history/history.htm>.
2. Darryl Evans, *Trading My Sorrows* (Mobile, Ala.: Hosanna! Music, 1998).