

Dear Pastor:

Greetings from Houston. I hope all is going well with you and your church. Over the last few months Evelyn and I have had the privilege of being in seven of the regional conferences. This has provided us the joy of meeting with many of our pastors on a one to one basis. We have finished the summer with a renewed sense of joy that God has placed us in leadership of such a wonderful community of men and women. We are indeed blessed.

I am writing this letter to inform you of a decision that the Vineyard USA Board made at its recent meeting in California.

Five years ago, a request was sent to me by a Vineyard church that we allow them to appoint a woman to be the senior pastor. We already had several ordained women senior pastors who were co-senior pastors with their husbands and one woman senior pastor. About the same time a church that was planted out of a Vineyard church that had a woman pastor was requesting to be adopted into the Vineyard.

There were other matters at work at these times that were requiring the Board to give some direction on this important and controversial issue. Todd Hunter had seen this before his departure as National Director and had already started the process of leading the Board to engage in the issue. Though John Wimber had made some remarks about women in ministry, no official position had ever been agreed upon by the Vineyard Board.

For these reasons, I took the issue to the Board. We agreed at that time that we would not make a decision until people on both sides of the issue had an opportunity to present papers that would be posted on the Vineyard USA website for review by Vineyard pastors. The Regional Overseers also had an opportunity to discuss the issue with their APCL's and the pastors in their Region. Thirteen people took advantage of this opportunity to write papers. These were posted for the next year on the Vineyard USA website.

After the Regional Overseers discussed it at the Regional level and after considerable discussion at Board meetings, the Board decided to clarify what had been the defacto but unstated policy: the issue of senior pastor leadership would remain as a prerogative of the local church. Our position was that the local church was the instrument for ordination. Local churches had the freedom to decide who was to be ordained and the freedom to ordain them. Our decision was to continue to live with that arrangement.

Several things happened in the period between 2001 and 2005 that made it necessary for me to bring the issue back to the Board for further clarification.

The position taken in 2001 dealt with the issue of ordination but it did not deal with the issue of trans-local relationships. Further, it allowed women to pastor, but they were not empowered in the same way that men were by the national and regional leadership. Could women speak at our regional and national leadership conferences? Could we encourage conferences that empowered women at any level of ministry? Could we write articles in *Cutting Edge* on successful women pastors and preachers in the movement? Could women become APCL's or lead Task Forces if

we saw that they were gifted to do so? Could the national leadership speak positively concerning what women were doing in leadership? Were our educational systems free to train women to be pastors and national leaders? The bottom line question was, “Does the national leadership have the prerogative to empower women at all levels of ministry in the Vineyard?”

The answer to this question was pressed upon us by a number of factors. First, we had been trying to get Gordon Fee to speak at our National Leadership Conference ever since I became a part of the National Board back in 1990. He is truly one of the more significant New Testament scholars of the twentieth century. When it was announced that he would be speaking, the decision was questioned because he happens to be in full support of women in ministry at every level. I did not ask him to speak because of his position regarding women in leadership and he did not address this concern, but his coming highlighted the fact that the lack of a policy allowed for controversy even on who would speak at our National Conference. Some raised the question.

A second thing happened just prior to the conference. The *Cutting Edge* staff made a decision to do an interview with one of our ordained women on the subject of preaching. They had previously written an interview with Barbara Brown, a nationally recognized Episcopal woman pastor. A few people responded to these articles in quite negative ways and stated their opposition to any empowerment of women beyond the local church level. They believed that the national church planting periodical should not be used in this way. They went on to express their displeasure for the fact that we had women speak at the National Conference. This had been done many times in the past, but the issue was highlighted in Columbus by a few walking out of the meeting when a woman spoke. Their concerns were appropriate in that we had no policy for trans-local ministry of women.

The third thing that happened that brought this issue back to the table was the fact that people on both sides of the issue said that the Vineyard USA Board had not spoken clearly in its 2001 decision. These people were requesting that further definition be given by the Board. Again the questions came up. Can women lead trans-local ministries? Can women pastors be recognized and empowered in trans-local meetings, etc.?

A fourth reason for bringing the issue back to the Board was that several women in the movement came to me and said something to the effect of, “we feel a bit like unwanted step children. We know we are allowed to pastor, but we cannot celebrate this for fear of offending someone.” They were not angry. They were not belligerent. They reflected the attitude of Christ. But they were in a position that none of us would want to live in - allowed but not empowered. Others raised concerns about whether Vineyard truly was an empowering environment for women to serve as pastors or church planters.

The final reason for bringing it back to the Board at this time is that many Board members felt conflicted on the issue. On the one hand they believed that women should be empowered to do ministry at all levels. On the other, they did not want to be offensive to those who believed differently. I personally felt this. I believed, and continue to believe, that the Lord placed me as the National Director to lead the movement at this time. I also believe strongly that, though I have great respect for those who disagree with me, some women are called and gifted to provide leadership at both the local and trans-local levels of the church. To refuse to do this violated my

convictions. I was responsible to empower, but I was not intentionally doing it. If I did not have the responsibility to empower, then my conscience could be clear before God and others. But if I had that responsibility, it became a violation of conscience. Both the Board and I had that responsibility and we were conflicted.

There were other things that happened that required the Board to deal with the issue at this time. But these were the primary reasons.

So I took the issue to the Board at our February meeting. I had been studying the Scriptures themselves on this issue for many years. This study had led me through about fifty books on the women's issue from many different perspectives. For the meeting I prepared an extensive bibliography of the most important books I believe there are on the subject. I had read through most of these very carefully. I also gave the Board a very complete documentation of the way the issue had been addressed throughout the entire history of the Vineyard.

After considerable discussion in which every member of the Board expressed themselves it was decided that we would not make a decision until the Regional Overseers had further opportunity to study this issue themselves and to lead their regions in a dialog about the issue. These discussions were to be completed by the September Board meeting. We also prepared a document (see attachment) giving guidelines for how people with different positions should act toward one another as we entered the process of dialogue. All of the APCL's were at that meeting, so the Regional Overseers were able to enter into the discussion immediately. The APCL's were then to take the discussion out to the pastors in their area and bring back the responses to the Regional Overseers. This dialogue continued throughout the summer.

During this time I heard directly from many pastors expressing their perspectives on this issue, as did the Regional Overseers and APCL's.

Having completed this process, the Board came together last week and unanimously agreed on the following position in regard to the trans-local ministry of women:

In response to the message of the kingdom, the leadership of the Vineyard movement will encourage, train, and empower women at all levels of leadership both local and trans-local. The movement as a whole welcomes the participation of women in leadership in all areas of ministry.

We also recognize and understand that some Vineyard pastors have a different understanding of the scriptures. Each local church retains the right to make its own decisions regarding ordination and appointment of senior pastors.

There is no hidden message in this. It is our attempt to simply say that we are committed to empowering women wherever and whenever we believe the Lord has gifted them for leadership. The local church is still free to make its own decision regarding who they will empower for local

church leadership. Nothing has changed on that. All Vineyard pastors will continue to respect pastors who have a different position on this matter. The attached document outlines the way this respect should be reflected.

This is a very difficult issue. Very sincere Christians have strong disagreements. Even if the issue were as simple as agreeing on the meaning of *authentain* or *kephale*, the division would still exist. But this question addresses much more. It involves questions regarding the nature of authority, how we interpret scriptures, and the influence of our understanding of the kingdom on the issue. It requires working through issues of ecclesiology (the nature of ordination), how to relate to our culture in missionally effective ways, and the nature of masculinity and femininity - to mention only a few. These are all issues we will need to work through and questions we will need to address as we endeavor to be what God has intended us to be for the twenty-first century.

The leaders of our movement, including myself and the members of our board are primarily pastor-practitioners and not professional theologians. This has always characterized our movement. Respected theologians and Bible scholars with current or historical ties to the Vineyard have taken opposite views on this issue based on their best reading of Scripture and careful theologizing. Given these limitations, it is not reasonable to expect that this issue could be resolved by Biblical expertise. It is not reasonable to expect that either position could be stated in a way that convincingly addresses all the objections from respected quarters. We can simply assure you that we have approached this decision prayerfully with our best reading of Scripture and spiritual discernment. We share this decision with conviction and clear conscience, but also with humility.

This decision is not a dictate passed down from the national leadership. Pastors continue to be free to handle these issues according to their convictions within the context of their local churches. It is simply a description of how we will act toward women in leadership as we endeavor to lead the Vineyard movement in the U.S. at the national level.

I look forward to providing more perspective on this issue as time and opportunity allows, keeping in mind that we have many important matters to attend to in our pursuit of the kingdom.

Please bear in mind that we have simply addressed the issue of whether to restrict someone from trans-local leadership positions in the Vineyard based on gender. We are not speaking to the questions of marital or family roles as this has never been a prominent concern in our movement.

We welcome, respect, and value pastors in the Vineyard who have different positions on the issue of women's roles in the church than we have taken. We have worked together for years fruitfully in spite of these and other differences among us, thanks to our shared treasure in Jesus and His Kingdom. The fact is, it is our conviction that a decision had to be made on this question for the health of our movement. Continuing in a position of unclarity on this question was not a viable option.

The tensions we live in are a part of the reality of the already/not yet. May we work together, with our differences, until the kingdom comes in its fullness and removes the barriers to our understanding.

Sincerely,

Your brother in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bertin A. Waggoner". The signature is written in black ink and includes a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Bertin A. Waggoner
National Director