

On Giving Money to Vineyard

by Ken Wilson, Vineyard Great Lakes Regional Overseer

Many churches in our region and throughout the Vineyard in the United States have given faithfully for many years so that we can be a community of churches.

At the same time, an unhealthy proportion of churches either give at a low level (less than 3%, which is our commitment within Vineyard USA), or in a surprising number of cases not at all. This brief article is for those Vineyard pastors whose churches give at a low level or not at all. It's also an article for pastors who are planning to plant Vineyard churches or adopt into the Vineyard.

Why give to Vineyard?

The answer to this question goes to the heart of what it means to be a community of churches. Pastors sometimes ask, "What do I get for my 3%?" Sometimes this question belies a view that Vineyard is something other than a community of churches, maybe something more like a franchise. In this case, the three percent would be like a franchise fee.

I'm tempted to answer the question, "What do I get for my three percent?" on its own terms: 1.) If you're ever in a church crisis that would benefit from outside help, you would get the support of fellow pastors [although if you are fortunate to never experience a crisis you won't receive this benefit]; 2) you get the equity that goes with the Vineyard name [i.e. someone performs a Google search for Vineyard churches in your area and visit yours as a result]; 3) if you are in need of health care coverage, you get the benefit of participating in the Vineyard health plan [without churches contributing to the national life of the Vineyard, we wouldn't have had a platform to form such a self-funding program].

One could go on.¹

¹ One could provide a little perspective and say that 3% is a small amount compared to other church associations. One could site the fact that Vineyard has opted to radically minimize the number of paid positions within translocal leadership, which allows us to only require 3% of local church annual income to function (which is considerably less than most translocal church organizations). This means that in some cases, we don't function as well. (For example, we don't have a national children's ministry staff person to coordinate children's ministry at our national conference, and the local churches that have coordinated it in the past found it was a crushing burden they couldn't sustain. In spite of the fact that we would love to have a children's program at the upcoming national conference, we can't pull it off.) This streamlined approach to leadership, where all of our Regional Overseers and Area Leaders serve without compensation, also keeps us from developing a top-heavy system. There's no "make-work church bureaucracy" in the Vineyard.

The better answer to the question, "What do I get for my three percent?" is: you have the opportunity to participate in a community of churches. You give to something that we are about together--supporting church planting and missions, learning to care for fellow pastors, sharing resources, ideas, and inspiration for being effective in the church enterprise, etc. It could be that you give more than you receive, or that you receive more than you give. Only one thing is certain: you get to participate in what we are together. The greater question is: Do you want to? Do you believe God wants you to?

Why is it a stretch for some Vineyard pastors to value giving to Vineyard?

There are many answers to this question. These are my top three answers (in no particular order).

1. For some of us, it's a stretch because we are dissatisfied with the Vineyard as a community of churches. I would ask pastors who withhold giving for this reason to search their hearts with these two questions: 1) Does my withholding from the community of churches *help* the community that I'd like to see improve? 2) Is it wise or spiritually healthy to be part of a community of churches in name only, to be or feel so disconnected that I don't value giving? What can I do about *that*?

2. For some of us, it's a stretch because our own church is in a financial crisis. We feel as though it's a choice between paying the utilities, paying for a much-needed administrative assistant, or contributing to Vineyard. I would ask pastors who withhold giving for this reason to talk over your situation with your Area Pastoral Care Leader. In other words, consider this issue with the benefit of outside counsel. Communicate with the leadership of the Vineyard, because the financial crisis in your church affects the wider Vineyard community.

3. For some of us, it's a stretch because we're not good at modeling how to participate in something we don't also lead. Senior pastors have a greater share of the leadership influence in the local church than we do in the trans-local Vineyard community; this can affect the way we participate in the trans-local community. Are any of us above this?

Let's explore this further. Vineyard sorts for risk taking, entrepreneurial, individuals within the ranks of its senior pastors--people who don't mind being in charge of something. If we don't like something in our local church, we have a lot of freedom to change it. We don't have the same degree of freedom in our trans-local community, because we're not the senior leader in that context.

How do we *teach by example* what it means to be in a community that we don't lead as the senior leader? We teach this by how we participate in the trans-local community that we are associated with. The heart attitudes and actions that we bring into the trans-local community are the same ones we are sowing into your local church community.

To make this more concrete, picture a member of your church asking you about giving. The person says, "You're asking me to give ten percent of my income to the church even though I don't have much say over how that money is spent? I can understand *you* giving 10% of *your* income. You're the pastor. You have a big voice in how the money is spent. Do you have *any idea* or experience giving to a community of faith where you're not in charge?"

Let's Talk

If you're a senior pastor within the Vineyard and you're not giving 3% to the Vineyard, give me a call, and let's talk. You can set up a phone appointment through my administrative assistant, Marcia Thaxton, by phone at 734/477-9135 x112, or by email at seniorpastor@annarborvineyard.org. I look forward to hearing from you.