

# **Worship as Missional Practice: Australian Vineyard case studies<sup>1</sup>**

**By Peter Downes and Darren Cronshaw**

## **Abstract**

The corporate worship gathering has been centrally important to Vineyard Churches, but the Emerging Missional Church (EMC) movement has challenged them to reconsider how corporate worship interfaces with mission. A linked series of case studies of three Australian Vineyard churches identifies several functions of the Sunday worship gathering. Worship is a ‘centripetal embrace’ for God’s people; which brings focus, community, continuity and a climax to the week. But worship as missional practice is equally about centrifugal release and the need for encouragement, equipping, empowering, direction and missional impetus. These functions are consistent with James Smith’s appeal for worship that forms disciples whose desires are shaped towards the Kingdom of God and whose imaginations are captured with a vision for being actors in God’s story.

**Keywords:** Worship, missional church, Vineyard church, qualitative research, church case study, community, Alan Hirsch, James Smith

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on Peter Downes, ‘The Purpose and Significance of the “Sunday” Corporate Worship Gathering in Australian Vineyard Churches’, Doctor of Ministry thesis (Australian College of Theology, Melbourne School of Theology, 2011), supervised by Darren Cronshaw.

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### **The Corporate Worship Gathering**

The corporate worship gathering has played a key role in Vineyard Churches since John Wimber started the movement in the USA in the 1980s and later released churches in Australia in 1995. Vineyard is a young movement characterised by intimacy in worship and an experience of the Holy Spirit in healing and signs and wonders. Its corporate gatherings have historically been a dynamic interaction with God and the lifeblood for other aspects of church life and mission.

A recent study examined the role and purpose the ‘Sunday’ corporate gathering through a linked series of three Australian Vineyard church case studies: Pine Rivers Vineyard Church (PRV) in Brisbane, Cabramatta Vineyard Church (CVC) in Sydney, and Network Vineyard Church (NVC) in Perth. The project explored the relationship of the corporate gathering to the missional expectations of church life, and looked closely at the influence of the ‘Emerging Missional Church’ (EMC) on Vineyard church life.

In the same year (2003) that the Australian Vineyard churches were released from Vineyard-USA to be governed by an Australian leadership, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch released a book entitled *The Shaping of Things to Come*.<sup>2</sup> This book encapsulated the message of the Emerging Missional Church (EMC) that it was time for a change in

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-century Church* (Hendrickson, Peabody, 2003).

Australian ecclesiology, and in fact ecclesiology across the Western world, in more missional directions.<sup>3</sup> Frost and Hirsch declared that the church needed to return to its missional heritage and not be so inward-looking. They also challenged the church about being the product of a modernist mindset and that it was time to engage more fully with the host culture and present the message of the gospel in a way that communicated more effectively.

EMC thinking quickly had significant influence on the ecclesiological theory and practice of a number of Vineyard churches and the purpose of this research is to understand that impact and help define the newly-shaped purpose and significance of the corporate worship gathering in Australian Vineyard churches. Important research questions that are addressed in the course of the this article, and the larger project it draws on, include the following:

- What change has there been over recent years in the practice and theory of “Sunday” worship gatherings in Australian Vineyard churches? (“What is going on?” in Richard Osmer’s methodological framework.<sup>4</sup>)
- What is the purpose and significance of the corporate worship gathering in the overall context of church life?
- What roles have the emerging church and postmodern culture played in bringing about any changes? (These two questions relate to Osmer’s second movement of “Why is it going on?”)

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Hirsch, “Who put the E into EMC?” *Catalyse: Quarterly News and Inspiration from the Forge Mission Training Network*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2004), pp. 1, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

- What do Vineyard church members see as the positive and required aspects of Vineyard corporate worship and how can these be strengthened? (This is related to Osmer's third movement of "What ought to be going on?")

The research identified nine functions of the Sunday worship gathering. These are what we have described as functions of 'centripetal embrace' which meet the needs of the gathered church: focus, community, continuity and a climax; and 'centrifugal release' which equip the church for ministry and mission through encouragement, equipping, empowering, direction and missional impetus.

Christian philosophy writer James Smith is making an important contribution to thinking about worship in the context of mission. Smith affirms a high view of worship as something that forms disciples whose desires are shaped towards the Kingdom of God and whose imaginations are captured with a vision for being actors in God's story.<sup>5</sup> This article discusses the empirical analysis of Vineyard church case studies and their approach to worship and missional practice, in conversation with the normative theological perspectives of the Cultural Liturgies project of James Smith.

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology of the project used quantitative and qualitative research methods for a case-study examination of three diverse Australian Vineyard churches. A case study research (CSR) approach has been consistently used in psychology, sociology, anthropology, business and other fields of science and is unique in its ability to assist in the understanding

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<sup>5</sup> James K A Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation*. Vol. 1 of Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2009); James K A Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Vol. 2 of Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2013).

of complex social phenomena.<sup>6</sup> It enables ‘detail, richness, completeness, and within-case variance’<sup>7</sup> to be investigated and analysed, making it a suitable approach for this project.

In order to furnish a representative picture of ecclesiastical expression within the Australian Vineyard we chose to do case studies of three churches that express well the movement’s diversity. The three churches were: Cabramatta Vineyard Church (Sydney); Network Vineyard Church (Cottesloe, Perth); and Pine Rivers Vineyard Church (Strathpine, Brisbane). These churches are diverse in their:

- capital city locations (Sydney, Perth, and Brisbane);
- socio-economic communities in which they serve; and
- ethnicity of their surrounding population.

Most importantly for our study they are also diverse in their thinking and expression in regard to the corporate worship service.

The case studies drew on a triangulation of data-gathering methods including surveys, focus groups and interviews, thus incorporating quantitative and qualitative data. This approach provided multiple vehicles of expression to accommodate the realities that participants wished to communicate. An anonymous online survey was open to all members of the three congregations, and 30-40 respondents participated from each church. All pastors of the Vineyard movement were also given opportunity to participate through another anonymous online survey. The 8-12 member focus groups were also open to all congregation members, and one focus group was conducted in each of the three churches. Finally, a number of people from each church, including the senior pastor, were then interviewed, and this gave in-depth background on each congregation’s history and values for worship and mission.

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<sup>6</sup> Robrt K Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Bent Flyvbjerg, ‘Case Study’, in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2011), p.314.

The researcher had the advantage of being an insider of the Australian Vineyard movement with an active involvement with each of the three churches, and was able to explore them from the perspective of an insider and a ‘reflective practitioner’. This enabled the researcher to be ‘truly responsive to the needs, issues, and concerns that are so important in shaping practice.’<sup>8</sup> The researcher was particularly careful to give churches and individuals the freedom to participate or not. An independent interviewer conducted the focus groups and interviews, so that the position of the researcher within Vineyard did not unduly influence the results. When coding and classifying the data, the researcher was careful to bring objective critique as well as sympathetic inside analysis. There are challenges to research as an insider, but there are also advantages that this project showed.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the co-author of this article brought a second level of analysis and theological reflection to the main researcher’s initial analysis.

The key research question of the project was how each church understands the purpose and significance of their corporate worship. This is a deeply ecclesiological question, but needed the skills of ethnography to explore. The investigation was sociological and empirical in analysing the experience and testimony of different group members, but it was also theological in reflecting theologically on what churches should be. This integration is the essence of what the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network advocates. The most fruitful study of churches combines ethnography (interpreted in broad sense as any qualitative

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<sup>8</sup> J J Loughran, ‘Effective Reflective Practice: in Search of Meaning in Learning about Teaching,’ *Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 53, no. 1 (Jan-Feb 2002), pp. 33-43; see also Donald A Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. R T McCutcheon, *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1999).

research) and ecclesiology (theologically reflecting on what church is intrinsically meant for).<sup>10</sup>

Nieman and Haight argue ecclesiological reflection needs to be grounded in congregational studies, appealing for ecclesiology from above (founded in biblical ideals and normative concepts) and ecclesiology from below (considering how churches function in their lived reality).<sup>11</sup> They contend that congregations need the perspectives of theology, but theology equally needs ethnography to maintain its authenticity to experience:

‘A closer connection with congregational studies would grant the opportunity for a reality check, particularly in the area of ecclesiology. If we are interested in theology that stands in service to the church, then it is essential that it engage accurately and amply with the local realities, sorrows, and hopes of actual assemblies of the faithful. Without this check, theological study can risk becoming insulated from the world in which it tries to speak, and thus its gifts of wisdom and reflection become muted or subverted.’<sup>12</sup>

This paper brings the experience and convictions about worship and mission of Vineyard churches as a reality check to the missional literature of Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch and others, in conversation also with James Smith’s teaching about worship as a formational practice.

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<sup>10</sup> Christian B Scharen, ed. *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); reviewed by Darren Cronshaw, in *Pacifica* 27:1 (February 2014), 118-119.

<sup>11</sup> James Nieman and Roger Haight, ‘On the Dynamic Relation between Ecclesiology and Congregational Studies,’ in *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Christian B Scharen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 11 (9-33).

<sup>12</sup> Nieman and Haight, ‘Ecclesiology and Congregational Studies,’ p. 30.

## The Influence of the Emerging Church

From the beginning of the Vineyard the corporate worship service has been the central platform of church life. Pine Rivers Vineyard in Brisbane classically expresses this.

Participants say that the three major ingredients of the PRV gathering – intimate worship, experiencing the presence of God, and the Spirit’s activity in spiritual gifts (especially healing), not only meet their immediate felt needs in worship, but carry them into the coming week with vision, empowerment and encouragement. Dallas Willard explains the ideal impact of such an encounter with God in worship:

‘If in worship we are met by God himself, our thoughts and words turn to perception and experience of God, who is then really present to us in some degree of his greatness, beauty and goodness. This will make for an immediate, dramatic change in our lives.’<sup>13</sup>

It is just such an encounter with God that the people of PRV say that they rely on to change and prepare them for ‘life and godliness’ (2 Peter 1:3).

The link between the worship gathering and mission at Network in Perth and Cabramatta Vineyard in Sydney is less obvious. Participants at Network made statements such as ‘It was communicated to us that Sunday isn’t as important as the things your lives are connected with. It was downplayed.’<sup>14</sup> This interpretation can easily be extrapolated into an ‘either/or’ response from members as to whether they engage their faith at church or in the world.

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<sup>13</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), p. 178.

<sup>14</sup> NVC, Network Vineyard Church, Focus Group, Perth (11 May 2010). Bruce McIntosh conducted this, and all other interviews and focus groups. Sound files and transcripts are all stored at Melbourne School of Theology on CD.

At CVC the ‘either/or’ becomes more evident. One CVC informant’s statement that ‘The Sunday meeting doesn’t have any significance for me at all’<sup>15</sup> has been fostered by the missional emphasis he and his church hold. This missional emphasis has been so strong at CVC that the corporate worship gathering was closed down for a number of years in favour of small groups and ‘Crave’ groups that they believed were more mission-friendly.<sup>16</sup>

It is not coincidental that changes at Network Vineyard Church (NVC) and Cabramatta Vineyard Church (CVC) regarding the purpose and significance of the corporate gathering commenced at the same time and headed in similar directions.<sup>17</sup> Although in both churches and particularly with the leaders (Stuart Wesley and Greg Trainor) questions were already being asked about ‘Sunday church,’ the arrival of emerging church literature and thinking in the Australian scene was the change catalyst.<sup>18</sup>

When all pastors in the Movement were questioned regarding their engagement with EMC thinking, the results showed it was mainly focussed on material presented by a handful of missional thinkers, notably Alan Hirsch, Michael Frost, Neil Cole, and Brian McLaren. When asked the question ‘Which emerging church authors and thinkers have most impacted you?’ the pastors who responded referred mainly to these thinkers (see Figure below):

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel, CVC participant, Interview, Sydney (26 May 2010).

<sup>16</sup> ‘Crave’ is an acronym for ‘Confess-Read-Ask-Value-Eat’, based on Neil Cole’s ‘Life Transformation Groups’ in Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), pp. 27-28.

<sup>17</sup> These stirrings commenced around 2002-2003, and were heightened by the release of Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*.

<sup>18</sup> Both Trainor and Wesley engaged with the work of the Forge Mission Training Network, and both served at some time on their respective State board of Forge. Delaney, at Pine Rivers Vineyard, has had no relationship with Forge and has had minimal engagement with Frost, Hirsch, or emerging church literature.

EMC/Emergent Proponent (and country)	Mentioned
Alan Hirsch (Aus)	14 x
Michael Frost (Aus)	9x
Brian McLaren (USA)	9x
Neil Cole (USA)	4x
Mark Driscoll (USA)	2x
James Thwaites (Aus)	2 x
5 others (varied)	1x

**FIGURE: IMPACT OF EMC/EMERGENT AUTHORS ON AUSTRALIAN VINEYARD PASTORS<sup>19</sup>**

When asked ‘what are some of the positive aspects of EMC thinking?’ some Vineyard pastors referred to the value of championing creativity, pioneering, justice, risk-taking, cultural relevance and taking church to the people.<sup>20</sup> However, some Vineyard pastors also saw EMC ideas as a danger or distraction to corporate worship, and were worried the worship gathering and its priority on worship and the gifts of the Holy Spirit can get lost.<sup>21</sup> Clearly, EMC thinking challenged the long held notion that worship is Vineyard’s highest value. It caused many churches to re-evaluate their values and the priority of the corporate gathering, especially as it impacted on missional activities.

The impact of Hirsch and Frost was becoming so evident in the Australian Vineyard Movement that Alan Hirsch was invited to be the keynote speaker at the National Leaders’ Conference in March 2006. The purpose of this invitation was to help the Movement understand the emerging/missional message and its benefits. Prior to this conference the EMC message was considered in a poor light, mainly through lack of knowledge of the

<sup>19</sup> VCA – Pastors, Australian Vineyard Pastors’ Survey, conducted by Peter Downes, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> VCA, Pastors’ Survey, pp. 11,12.

<sup>21</sup> VCA, Pastors’ Survey, pp. 14-16.

material and its proponents. Hirsch's visit saw Vineyard leaders embrace EMC more positively.<sup>22</sup>

However the emphasis Frost and Hirsch placed on 'incarnational ecclesiology' included questioning what they have labelled as the prevalent 'attractional' mode of church.<sup>23</sup> Such an attractional mode 'bids people to *come and hear* the gospel in the holy confines of the church and its community.'<sup>24</sup> The EMC movement suggests traditional churches have been extractional, drawing people out of their community to become a part of the church community. Rather, they suggest, the church's role is to engage in and with those in their local community and to take Christ into that community. This ideal theological and strategic position is arguably a needed balance for churches in the Western world that rely on people coming to them, rather than the people of God taking the church out into the world. But on the other hand there is also a need for our churches to be attractive, and attractional evangelism methods are effective to some extent.<sup>25</sup>

Hirsch has softened his critique of 'attractional church' in more recent books. He concedes that a missional-incarnational ethos will cultivate church communities that are culturally attractive, albeit not relying on attraction as the primary approach to mission.<sup>26</sup> He argues 'evangelistic-attractional' methods of a contemporary church growth model of church can be fruitful, but they only connect with a certain segment of the population, perhaps 15% in

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<sup>22</sup> The Australian Vineyard has never held issue with the missional component of the EMC message. In fact NCLS research indicates that the Australian Vineyard rated as the denomination that scored highest and second highest for the two questions in the 2006 NCLS Survey that most equate with the 'missional' work of community engagement. NCLS Research, 'Vineyard Denominational Profile: Summary – Your Strengths' (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping*, pp. 33-107.

<sup>24</sup> Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping*, p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Chad Hall, 'Missional: Possible Steps to Transform a Consumer Church into a Missional Church', *Leadership Journal* (Winter 2007), p. 35; Mark Sayers, '5 Things We Got Wrong in the Emerging Missional Church', Mark Sayers: Faith & Culture blog, <http://marksayers.wordpress.com/older-articles/5-things-we-got-wrong-in-the-emerging-missional-church/>, accessed 22 October 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Alan Hirsch, 'The Missional-Incarnational Impulse', in *Re-Imagining God and Mission: Perspectives from Australia*, ed. Ross Langmead (Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum, 2007), p. 78

Australia or 35% in America. He implies they have difficulty crossing the post-Christendom cultural distance that separates many people from contemporary church culture.<sup>27</sup> This is why there is a desperate need for missional-incarnational approaches in mission to the Western world.

The term ‘incarnational’ has often been used in opposition to ‘attractional’ as a basic stance of church. When a church puts all its efforts into attracting people to come in through its doors, there is often little energy left for taking church to the community. But why must it be either/or? Halter and Smay address this question in their book *And*. They suggest both approaches to church, missional and traditional, can not only co-exist, but in fact complement one another. This occurs when ‘there is a balance between gathering a community together and scattering them into the world’.<sup>28</sup> The Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) has adopted both incarnational and attractional indicators for evaluating missional effectiveness.<sup>29</sup> Mission is expressed primarily in incarnationally going and taking the gospel to people, but it can also be expressed as people are attracted to come to church and worship.

Moreover, Hirsch, in a recent book co-authored with megachurch leader Dave Ferguson, appeals for church leaders – of any shape or size – to overcome the distraction of either/or thinking.<sup>30</sup> They argue for learning the incarnational missiology, exponential thinking and church-growth evangelistic theory, but ensuring that everything is undergirded by an apostolic imagination:

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<sup>27</sup> Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 34-37.

<sup>28</sup> Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *And: The Gathered and Scattered Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 26. The point of difference between what Halter and Smay suggest, and what Vineyard churches represent, is in the definition of purpose of the gathered church. The primary focus of *And* is that people are gathered in order to prepare for mission. There is very little emphasis of worship or community as values of the gathered people of God, which are primary Vineyard corporate gathering values.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Kaldor et al., *Mission under the Microscope: Keys to Effective Sustainable Mission* (Sydney: Openbook, 1995), pp. xvii-51.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson, *On the Verge: A Journey into the Apostolic Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), pp. 40-42.

‘We believe church can be attractional and missional at the same time *only* if the organizational generics, our core ideas, the paradigmatic brain at the center, legitimizes both impulses as important and justifiable expressions of what it means to contextualize the gospel in the Western world. ... This isn't necessarily easy, however, because we are steeped in oppositional-type thinking and because the movement approach on which so much depends has been largely marginalized, is misunderstood, and is underdeveloped.’<sup>31</sup>

The missional movement has challenged the church in the West to take seriously a missional-incarnational posture and to overcome the dualism that separates worship and spirituality from everyday life. The EMC message has been significant for many Vineyard leaders and church members because it was an idea whose time had come. The EMC movement is arguably a revitalisation movement.<sup>32</sup> Reggie McNeil declares it is ‘the biggest thing going since the reformation. It is a re-alignment, a renaissance.’<sup>33</sup> Many Vineyard pastors agree with the sentiments expressed by McNeil and see that EMC helped realign church life and call the church back to missional engagement.

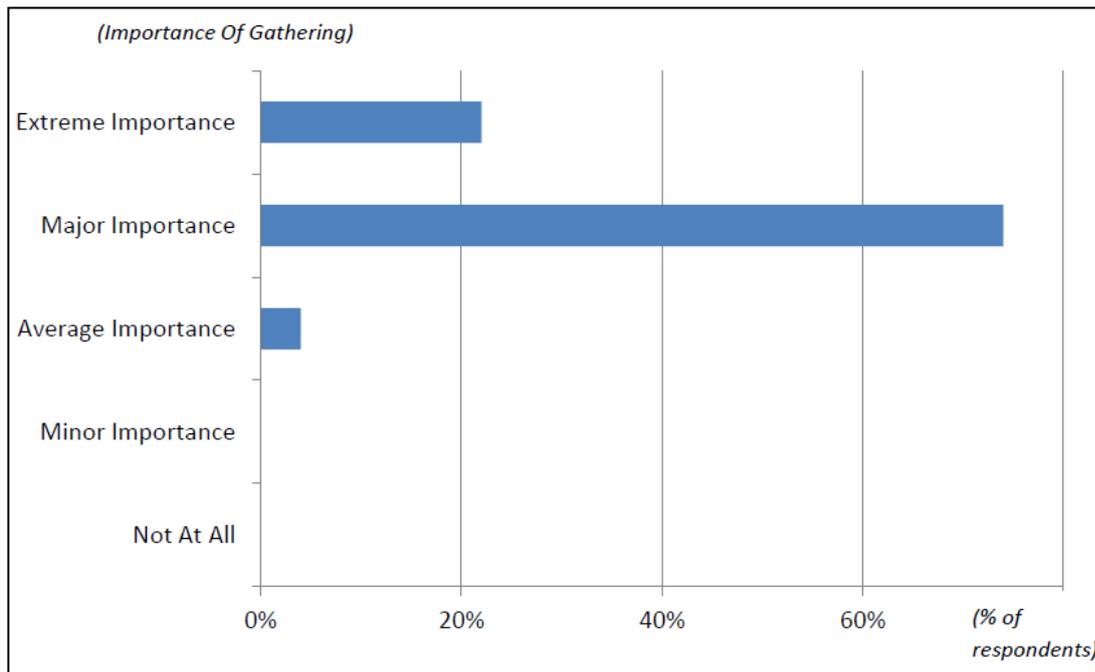
Australian Vineyard pastors are well placed to hold together a vital corporate worship life and a strong missional expression. They are well served by the heritage of a strong and dynamic Sunday church gathering, combined with embracing of EMC approaches to mission and discipleship. When asked how important the corporate worship gathering was to their church’s life, 22 of 23 Australian Vineyard pastors responded the Sunday corporate gathering was of ‘major importance’ or ‘extreme importance’.

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<sup>31</sup> Hirsch and Ferguson, *On the Verge*, p. 42.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony F. C. Wallace, ‘Revitalization Movements: Some Theoretical Considerations for Their Comparative Study’, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 58 (1956), pp. 64-281.

<sup>33</sup> Reggie McNeil, ‘Developing Missional Leadership in the 21st Century’, Class Notes, Morling College, Sydney (28 May, 2007).



**FIGURE: IMPORTANCE OF CORPORATE WORSHIP GATHERING TO VCA PASTORS<sup>34</sup>**

In a similar question, when the pastors were asked how important would they like the (Sunday) corporate gathering to be, only one answered ‘not at all’, and no-one indicated ‘minor importance’.<sup>35</sup> At the same time the Vineyard churches in Australia had the highest score of any Australian denomination for ‘practical and diverse service in the community’.<sup>36</sup> The Vineyard movement is well placed to combine a vital worship gathering and a strong missional engagement.

The EMC has impacted many Vineyard churches, but the degree of that impact varies from church to church. Some have expressed sentiments strongly opposed to the emerging missional church and have made no changes. Others such as NVC and CVC have significantly changed the centrality and value of the corporate gathering in their ecclesiology. However, most pastors still see corporate worship as of major significance.

<sup>34</sup> VCA, Pastors' Survey.

<sup>35</sup> VCA, Pastors' Survey.

<sup>36</sup> NCLS, ‘Vineyard Denominational Profile’, p. 5.

The emergence of the EMC has caused many Australian Vineyard leaders to reconsider the nature of their role as leaders and what their local church is to focus on. They have reconsidered the place of the corporate gathering and the priority of worship. Without such a challenge from EMC an unhealthy and unthinking allegiance to the status quo would have predominated for some pastors.

The diversity allowed in the Australian Vineyard movement has given room for those wanting to align with EMC values. At the same time it has allowed other churches to hold closer to the traditional corporate gathering template. The Australian Vineyard movement has therefore developed a healthy corporate gathering expression that still has worship as its centrepiece, yet allows room for a strong missional priority in the local church.

Moreover, Australian Vineyard churches, at their best, adopt worship as a missional practice. Worship is intrinsically valuable and worthwhile for what the people of God offer to God, but it also has value in the ways it gathers and sends them. James Smith argues for a high view of worship that does not just inform what people know, but shapes what they love and desire and what captures their imagination.<sup>37</sup> At its best, Smith maintains, Christian worship forms Christians as radical disciples who long for the Kingdom of God to be worked out in the world. This is a missional view of worship: ‘caught up in the *missio Dei*, recruiting the hearts and minds of the people of God into the very life of God so that we can once again take up our creational and re-creational calling – to bear God’s image *for* and *to* all of creation.’<sup>38</sup> This is the theological ideal of worship, according to Smith, but what is the interplay of worship and mission in these Vineyard churches?

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<sup>37</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*; Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, p 151.

## Centripetal and Centrifugal Effects of the Worship Gathering

We look now at some interesting findings regarding the relationship between the corporate worship gathering and missional practice in Australian Vineyard churches. Two streams of thinking have clearly emerged from the data that speak of the purpose and significance of the Sunday gathering. We call these streams:

- The Centripetal Embrace; and
- The Centrifugal Release.

The language of ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ is used to speak of Israel, the people of God, and their mission. In Bible College lectures students are often directed to Isaiah 60:1-4 where Israel is described as being ‘a light to the nations’, centripetally attracting other ethnic groups to Israel’s worship like moths. This is then contrasted with the Great Commission to centrifugally ‘go and make disciples of all nations’ (Matthew 28:19). Theologians use the terms to reflect on church life and the church’s relationship with the world.<sup>39</sup>

Yet we cannot simplistically draw a line between an Old Testament ‘centripetal’ view of mission and a New Testament ‘centrifugal’ focus. Robert Plummer argues that Paul considered the congregational contribution to mission to primarily be the result of a centripetal lifestyle, and that the centrifugal missionary function was left to a small number of individuals who were called to the missionary life.<sup>40</sup> But missiologist David Bosch refines this view further and adds centrifugal mission to the corporate responsibility of the congregation:

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<sup>39</sup> E.g. Martin E. Marty, ‘From the Centripetal to the Centrifugal in Culture and Religion: the Revolution Within this Century’, *Theology Today* 51:1 (1994), pp. 5-16.

<sup>40</sup> Robert L. Plummer, *Paul’s Understanding of the Church’s Mission* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006).

‘One may, therefore, perceive the church as an ellipse with two foci. ... In and around the first it acknowledges and enjoys the source of its life; this is where worship and prayer are emphasized. From and through the second focus, the church engages and challenges the world. This is the forth-going and self-spending focus, where service, mission and evangelism are stressed. ... Neither focus should ever be at the expense of the other; rather they stand in each other’s service. The church's *identity* sustains its *relevance* and *involvement*.’<sup>41</sup>

Bosch and others see that the first focus of the church is to ‘be’ the church that enjoys and worships her God. This relates with the activity of the corporate and gathered church we have described by the term ‘centripetal embrace’. From that place, a place of ‘being’ with God and in God, arises the desire and empowering to share this life with others. It inevitably leads to a propulsion we have entitled the ‘centrifugal release’.

Smith identifies this dynamic and underlines how centripetal gathering and centrifugal mission work together:

‘[E]ven if there is a centrifugal *telos* to Christian worship and formation, there is also a regular centripetal invitation to recenter ourselves in the Story, to continually pursue and deepen our *incorporation*. It’s not a matter of choosing between worship *or* mission; nor are we faced with the false dichotomy of church *or* world; cathedral *or* city. To the contrary, we worship *for* mission; we gather *for* sending; we center ourselves in the practices of the body of Christ *for the sake of*

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<sup>41</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), p. 385.

the world; we are reformed in the cathedral to undertake our image-bearing commission to reform the city.’<sup>42</sup>

If this is the theological ideal as Smith articulates, let’s explore the empirical reality: firstly the dynamics of the centripetal embrace, and then look at what it makes possible in the centrifugal release.

### **The Centripetal Embrace**

The three church pastors of this research agree that the Sunday service is crucial to the life of their church.<sup>43</sup> When all of the Vineyard pastors who responded to the pastors’ survey were asked ‘How important in the life of your church is the (Sunday) corporate gathering?’ 22 out of 23 respondents (96%) indicated it was of ‘major’ or ‘extreme’ importance. When the question was slightly varied to ask how important they ‘would like it to be’ three of the pastors downgraded their response to ‘average importance’, leaving 19 out of 23 respondents (83%) wanting it to be of ‘major’ or ‘extreme’ importance.<sup>44</sup>

Jenny offered the following picture of the corporate gathering:

‘I have a picture of our corporate worship gathering as being the centre of a multicoloured parachute. In free playtime, the parachute rises and falls, billows and moves as a covering over the different activities of those underneath it. Some run in and out under it, some try to catch it, some just look up in wonder at it, but no one is oblivious to it. There is a circular core in the middle where all the different colours meet, a pivotal connecting point.’<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, p. 154.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Sunday’ is an indicative term, not a compulsory one.

<sup>44</sup> VCA, Pastors’ Survey.

<sup>45</sup> Jenny, CVC participant, Interview, Sydney (25 May 2010).

What is it that causes church members to view the corporate gathering as the ‘pivotal connecting point’ of church life as represented by Jenny’s picture? The following points outline some of the things offered by the Sunday service that help understand why it holds its pivotal position.

### **a. Stability and Focus**

The two churches that have made choices to ‘decentralise’ the corporate worship gathering have recognised part of the cost in doing so is a lack of stability and shared focus to the overall life of the church. Participants at Network observed that when different groups moved further away from the central Sunday gathering they tended to ‘dissipate’ or ‘peter out’.<sup>46</sup> CVC also has a growing appreciation of the need to come together under the one roof, even it is only monthly. Even Trainor, while still not wanting to give the worship gathering central importance, sees the need to give it added focus in this stage of the church’s life: ‘The more the network expands outward the more central and important the first Sunday service is in keeping us focused on the things we need to be focused on.’<sup>47</sup>

Smith helps us understand how worship forms the people of God, not by feeding them information but by cultivating their desires in directions that are consistent with the Kingdom of God. Worship helps to counter misinformation that the broader culture offers. It trains God’s people to love God and perceive the world as God sees it. As churches call people of all cultural and other backgrounds to worship, it helps us grasp the radically inclusive call of the gospel. As we confess our sin, we leave behind those things that decrease our capacity to represent God in the world. As we contribute our offering and pray for one another and the

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<sup>46</sup> NVC, Focus Group.

<sup>47</sup> CVC, Cabramatta Vineyard Church, Focus Group, Sydney (13 May 2010).

world, we are reminded that the good news is for others and not just for ourselves. Worship helps form and focus us.<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, the corporate worship gathering plays a key role in keeping everyone focused on the same things and heading in the same direction.

### **b. Family and Community**

Another significant function of the corporate gathering according to those interviewed in the three churches was that of establishing a sense of community and a ‘family home’<sup>49</sup> for church members. The church gathered offers something the world is longing for – a place to belong.<sup>50</sup>

Norman Faramelli comments that the ‘local congregation’ is a vibrant reality and cannot be seen as a static entity and it plays an important role in building community.<sup>51</sup> Therefore to make a choice to stand aside from the corporate gathering on theological or philosophical grounds alone is irresponsible and certainly not pastoral. Network Vineyard found itself on the edge of this dilemma a few years ago. Wesley explains how NVC realised that children in particular need the concrete expression of a Sunday gathering:

‘About four or five years ago, when we were becoming more aware of the emerging church stuff, we also became more aware of families. We realised it was one thing for adults to think about a theological framework and not having a Sunday service, but the children don’t have that privilege...they are concrete thinkers who need concrete examples. Same with the use of music, it’s really

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<sup>48</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*; reviewed by Darren Cronshaw, in *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 8:2 (2011), pp. 199-200.

<sup>49</sup> NVC, Focus Group.

<sup>50</sup> ‘There is not one certain type from the Mercy people... They come because they feel safe and belong. They feel family.’ PRVC, Pine Rivers Vineyard Church, Focus Group, Brisbane (12 May 2010).

<sup>51</sup> Norman J. Faramelli, ‘The Future of the Local Congregation in Urban Ministry’, *Anglican Theological Review*, 76:4 (1994), pp. 483-94

concrete (although somewhat abstract with the language thing). That we stand and sing is a concrete way of saying we are focusing on God. We became very convicted about that in relation to kids and young people.’<sup>52</sup>

Other NVC members also mentioned the value of the corporate gathering for people in minority groups or in need such as the elderly or those on the fringes of faith or church. For many of these people the doors into personal relationship in their local community have closed for various reasons (including death of family members, disability, fear and immobility) and the church has become their family. The example of Network speaks of how vital it is that the congregational door be kept wide open for those seeking a place to belong.<sup>53</sup>

### **c. Continuity**

People are attracted to the Sunday gathering because it gives a sense of continuity to their own story and to the larger Christian story to which they belong. As one pastor puts it, ‘I think it is important as a rallying point for relational and corporate cohesion where shared practices create a common bond and identity.’<sup>54</sup> We all need to see that what we belong to makes sense and to have a glimpse of the bigger picture to be able to fully understand our own place in it all. Rebekah states, ‘in a corporate setting on a Sunday morning, it’s more about the big picture of God, the big capacity of God, the generous love of God ... so all the big stories of God. So, that kind of over-arching story and response to God.’<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Stuart Wesley, NCV pastor, Interview, Perth (8 June 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Pine Rivers and Cabramatta also exemplify this, e.g. ‘this bloke is someone who lost his family because of his mental illness and I’ve just seen how God provides such a substitute for him and he still struggles with a lot of grief. He can come to church and cry and people will pray for him. It’s just such an integral part of his life, he would be lost without it.’ Natalie, PRVC participant, Interview, Brisbane (28 June 2010); and ‘When I was a non-Christian and came to church for the first time I felt really welcomed, warm and comforting because the people at church befriended me straight away and didn’t make me feel lonely and lost.’ CVC, *Survey*.

<sup>54</sup> VCA, Pastors’ Survey.

<sup>55</sup> Rebekah, NVC participant, Interview, Perth (9 June 2010).

Smith suggests that one of the most important characteristics of worship is that it invites us into a bigger story; seeing who we are, whom we belong to, and who our neighbours are. Worship helps recalibrate our attunement to God and to awareness of where we fit as actors in God's story: 'If the church is a centrifuge, sending out image-bearers to take up the commission in God's good-but-broken world, it must also be a community of practice that centripetally gathers for dispositional reformation.'<sup>56</sup>

Western society is impacted by postmodern trends and thinking by nature of the fact that it is the host culture in which it lives. A strong motif in postmodern culture is that of the 'journey' and although they may have rejected the 'metanarrative', postmoderns still need a context in which to live out their local narratives.<sup>57</sup> The local congregation can be that context and provide fellow 'pilgrims' or 'tribe members' a place to share their journey. When asked what she would miss out on if she couldn't attend Sunday worship gatherings Jenny responded, 'I would miss the corporate worship and the corporate connections. I would miss belonging to the big picture.'<sup>58</sup> Trainor, who pastors a congregation predominantly made up of people in their teens and twenties, says of the corporate gathering, 'It is important because we are a diffuse network of tribes and we need something to bring us together and to give us a sense of being on a journey together.'<sup>59</sup> He sees that an important purpose of the corporate gathering is to keep the individuals and small groups of his church journeying in the right direction.

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<sup>56</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, p. 157.

<sup>57</sup> See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), p. xxiv.

<sup>58</sup> Jenny, Interview.

<sup>59</sup> Trainor, Interview.

#### **d. Climax or Culmination**

For many people the Sunday service is the high point of the week. It plays the role of taking them out of whatever daily life holds and putting them in a transcendent place above all else. 'It's the cherry on top of life, the coming together, the celebration of what has happened during the week.'<sup>60</sup>

The corporate gathering also offers a type of landing point for church members. It is a place where this life that is lived before God, with God, and in God is all brought together and located in some form of physical, spiritual and emotional actuality. The grammatical equivalent would be the full stop at the end of the sentence. It gathers what has come before it and brings it to a close.

Worship brings all of life before God. It is not about 'what can God do to bless me?', but brings all that we have experienced before God. Smith argues worship should not be hijacked around individualism or novelty, but is to help Christians express what they offer to God, and also bring all they have experienced and are facing and be formed to perceive the world as God does.<sup>61</sup>

We have called these things the 'centripetal embrace' of the corporate gathering because they are those facets of the gathering that beckon us to come and belong, and find our place and identity. They call us to God and offer us not only a sense of belonging but create a place of safety and certainty for us, like the strong embrace of a loving parent.

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<sup>60</sup> PVR, Focus Group.

<sup>61</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, p. 182.

## The Centrifugal Release

As well as the centripetal embrace of the corporate worship gathering there is what we can consider as a centrifugal effect. The corporate gathering is crucial to the mission of the local church in sending out its members to incarnational ministry in the world. If the Sunday gathering is ‘the glue’ as we mentioned in the last section, it is also ‘the powerhouse’ of church life. Eddie Gibbs states, ‘A prioritization of worship results, not in the marginalizing of mission, but in the energizing of it.’<sup>62</sup> It is not a choice for ‘worship *or* mission’ we are asked to make, it is a commitment to ‘worship *and* mission’.

Smith counsels against an approach of worship ‘to get something out of’ and instead urges the importance of worship sending people into their world with an understanding of the story they are acting out:

‘Worship is not merely time with a deistic god who winds us up and then sends us out on our own; we don’t enter worship for “top up” refuelling to then leave as self-sufficient, autonomous actors. . . . To emphasize the s/ending of Christian worship is not to reduce worship to moral formation or to treat the presence of God as a tool for our self-improvement. Rather than centrifugal *end* of Christian worship is integral to the Story we rehearse in Christian worship; sending is internal to the logic of the practice. To emphasize that Christian action is the end or *telos* of Christian worship is not to instrumentalize worship but is rather to “get” the Story that is enacted in the drama of worship.’<sup>63</sup>

Worship, therefore, is catalytic for mission. Smith’s convictions about worship are consistent with what we saw empirically. The Vineyard members we interviewed or who attended focus

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<sup>62</sup> Eddie Gibbs, *Leadership Next: Changing Leaders in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2005), p. 76.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, p. 153.

groups indicated four ways that the corporate gathering plays a significant role in preparing them for mission: encouragement, equipping, direction and empowering.

### **a. Encouragement**

For both the writer to the Hebrews (Hebrews 10:24, 25) and Paul (1 Corinthians 14) the church gathering played a vital role in encouraging and building up the members of the body. Paul continually emphasises it in his snapshot of the Corinthian church gathering and particularly relates it to the gift of prophecy.<sup>64</sup> The purpose of gathering and exercising spiritual gifts is to ‘strengthen’, ‘encourage’, ‘edify’ and ‘encourage’ the church.

Whether it is a result of prophecy or other aspects of corporate life Paul’s example of encouragement is well replicated in Vineyard church life. This is an encouragement to engage in ministry and mission. For example at CVC, ‘We are all encouraged to take personal responsibility and not ride on coat tails of leaders.’<sup>65</sup> At NVC ‘We are encouraged as members of the church to recognise and use our gifts’,<sup>66</sup> and at CVC the close sense of family is a source of great encouragement, as individuals know ‘that people there have got your back, and supporting you.’<sup>67</sup> These are just a few of the references in the data to ‘encouragement’ and indicate it is a major feature of the Vineyard corporate dynamic.

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<sup>64</sup> In many churches today prophecy is expected only through the preached word of God, and not as a separate gift as indicated in 1 Corinthians 14. The place of prophecy in the church today ranges from being a harsh critique on the church and society through to being over-generous in nature as seen in the common practice of giving personal prophecies ‘over’ someone. This latter practice is common in Pentecostal and charismatic circles, including the Vineyard, even though it is a practice that does not have an underlying biblical foundation. Prophecy under the APEPT model of Hirsch and the EMC is also different from the nature of prophecy that Paul illustrates in 1 Corinthians 14. Hirsch defines its role as directed to ‘advocacy’, ‘social justice’, ‘obedience’, and ‘being countercultural’. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, pp. 170-175. These are all biblical functions of prophetic leadership, but are not the purpose of prophecy in the corporate gathering. Paul clearly states prophecy when the body comes together ‘speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort’ (1 Corinthians 14:3).

<sup>65</sup> PRV, Focus Group.

<sup>66</sup> NVC, Focus Group.

<sup>67</sup> Joe, CVC participant, Interview, Sydney (25 May 2010); also ‘I value being encouraged to seek out Jesus in each of our everyday lives, what and where ever we live/work.’ CVC, Survey.

## **b. Equipping**

One of the key verses that has been heard throughout the global Vineyard over the years has been Ephesians 4:12a, 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry'. Wimber constantly emphasised the imperative of equipping the saints for ministry, and it has always featured as a part of what happens in Vineyard church gatherings. Therefore ministry time was not just a platform-led ministry done by the ministry 'heavyweights' but was a clinic where the entire congregation was given an opportunity to learn and engage in praying for one another, or giving words of encouragement or prophecy.

Throughout the history of the Vineyard there has been an emphasis on the 'apprenticeship' model of discipling people and equipping them with ministry skills.<sup>68</sup> In this model someone who has a degree of experience or maturity invites someone who is inexperienced and takes them through the following steps: Step 1: Join with me and watch as I minister to others; Step 2: Follow my lead and minister with me; Step 3: We minister to others together; Step 4: You take the lead in ministry and I will support you; Step 5: Let us part and each go and find someone else to apprentice.

It is a model not only used in praying for one another in a church context or during ministry time. As indicated earlier by Trainor the gifts are primarily for use in the world and so equipping the saints must have this as its focus. Delaney also recognises that essentially ministry is to take place in the 'marketplace' and says, 'When we come here together it's our opportunity to equip people in their relationship with Jesus during the week.'<sup>69</sup>

Members from all three churches in our research agree that they feel equipped by their Sunday gathering. Gayle from Pine Rivers states that PRV is, 'a church that wants to do what

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<sup>68</sup> See AVC-USA. *Theological and Philosophical Statements* (AVC, Anaheim, 1995), p. 26.

<sup>69</sup> Kirk Delaney, Pine Rivers Vineyard Church pastor, Interview, Brisbane (30 June 2010).

Jesus said. But also it equips us to do that. I feel like I've been equipped to do that.'<sup>70</sup> And Daniel from Cabramatta Vineyard emphasises the high priority at that church of equipping people for mission to their local community<sup>71</sup>, a value that is reinforced at their monthly corporate gatherings.<sup>72</sup>

The data suggests the corporate gathering is a good place to equip God's people for life and ministry as it brings together a pool of experienced mentors, people who have needs to be ministered to and a safe place in which to experiment and train one another.

### **c. Empowering**

One of the reasons that Cabramatta Vineyard is returning to a more deliberate monthly corporate gathering is the recognition that such a gathering gives a significant opportunity to empower their people for ministry, as Trainor comments:

'There needs to be a time when we come together to tell the stories, to celebrate, and to be empowered, inspired or reenergized to go again. And that's the place of the central meeting.'<sup>73</sup>

Trainor makes it clear this empowering is more than just being encouraged or stirred up for action, but is a distinct work of the Spirit that takes place in the corporate gathering:

'There is something about the manifest presence that isn't reproduced in the smaller groups, and since we are a Vineyard church and the people of the presence I think that is of critical importance. The experience of intimate

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<sup>70</sup> Gayle, PRVC participant, Interview, Brisbane (29 June 2010).

<sup>71</sup> Daniel, Interview.

<sup>72</sup> Greg Trainor, Cabramatta Vineyard Church pastor, Interview, Sydney (25 May, 2010).

<sup>73</sup> Trainor, Interview.

connection is central to the mission we have, fed by powerful worship experiences.<sup>74</sup>

Similar accounts are given by members at Network and Pine Rivers of the corporate gathering being a time of empowering. The pastors of the movement also agree. In the pastors' survey a number of the pastors commented on the increased dynamic of the Spirit's work and the stronger sense of the manifest presence of God in the larger worship gathering.<sup>75</sup> They acknowledged similar things could happen in small groups, but usually not with the same power and impact. It may be debated whether this is sociology or pneumatology, but it is in keeping with Jesus teaching on prayer when he says that when two or more agree together he will answer their prayer (Matthew 18:19).

Being empowered for centrifugal mission is possible after being centripetally embraced in worship. We cannot prepare for co-mission with God without meeting God in worship and experiencing the empowering of the Spirit. Worship functions to recentre worshipers as missionaries in Christ through engaging the Bible, sacraments and other spiritual practices.<sup>76</sup>

#### **d. Direction**

As well as encouraging and equipping for mission, the church gathering can provide direction for mission. Vineyard pastors acknowledged this in the survey and used terms such as 'direction', 'confirmation', 'hearing what's on God's heart', and 'hearing what the Spirit is saying.'<sup>77</sup> There is a danger here in having a high appreciation for the prophetic word that

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<sup>74</sup> Trainor, Interview.

<sup>75</sup> E.g. 'there is just something special that happens when a group comes together corporately to worship, pray and play'; 'this is where in the context of worship God releases his gifts and allows the opportunity for all the church to be involved'; and 'Even though deeper relationships may be experienced in a smaller group the total gifting that a church possess can only be fully experienced by a corporate meeting.' VCA, Pastors' Survey.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, pp. 3, 154.

<sup>77</sup> E.g., 'It is vital to gather as a community in order to hear what the spirit is saying to us'; and 'It is the primary place of worship, and teaching/steering from leadership.' VCA, Pastors' Survey.

becomes exalted over scripture. When the church comes together and hears God's prophetic word it must check that it is in alignment and founded upon scripture.

The corporate gathering is a healthy context for receiving God's direction to the individual or the body. It brings an opportunity to test the word as well as enhancing the ability to hear the word:

'There seems to be a greater sense of both the grace of God and his gifting upon us as we gather. As a result of that we want to hear what is on God's heart that leads us into the week to come. I think it's essential for us here at Vineyard Pine Rivers.'<sup>78</sup>

It is this strong dependency on 'doing what they see the Father doing'<sup>79</sup> at Pine Rivers that creates an unbreakable link between corporate worship and mission. If mission is joining with God in his mission (*missio Dei*) it makes sense that the church will find the direction and the sending for mission as it comes before him. The corporate worship gathering then becomes the pre-eminent place for receiving direction and impetus for mission.

The directional influence of worship is broader than specific 'words from God' that may be prophetically spoken in a gathered worship context. Worship gives direction, Smith claims, by forming Christians' desires and how they see the world. This is critically important in a society with all sorts of competing voices. Says Smith:

'To perceive the world is to always already perceive it *as* a certain kind of space: as mere 'nature' or God's creation; as the flattened, disenchanted space for human self-assertion or the enchanted, sacramental realm of God's good gifts; as a competitive arena for my plunder and self-fulfillment or a shared space of

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<sup>78</sup> Delaney, Interview.

<sup>79</sup> John 5:19

neighbors who beckon to me for care and compassion; as a random assemblage for which we now claim ‘progress’ or the stage on which is played the drama of God’s gracious redemption.<sup>80</sup>

Worship gives direction as Christians leave the worship gathering for how they should see the world they re-enter.

#### **e. Missional Impetus**

The corporate gathering has great potential to fuel the missionary task. At Cabramatta Joe sees the potential of the corporate meeting to create a place of nurture but goes further: ‘We are very much sent, not just to stay in one place and nurture, but to nurture and send out.’<sup>81</sup> Or as a Network member recalls the words of his preacher one Sunday morning, ‘It is not so much about our seating capacity but our sending capacity!’<sup>82</sup> And yet what happens in the building and what happens outside the building seem to be strongly linked. A NVC participant indicates, ‘Sunday is not the ‘big gig’. There is a constant affirmation of people’s mission and ministry which is out there.’<sup>83</sup> CVC makes the link by stating: ‘We are a genuine worshipping community that is committed to the mission of Jesus. Our meetings together reflect the life that happens outside the meeting’.<sup>84</sup>

In his book *Let the Nations Be Glad*, evangelical theologian and writer John Piper declares:

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<sup>80</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, p. 138.

<sup>81</sup> Joe, Interview.

<sup>82</sup> NVC, Survey.

<sup>83</sup> NVC, Focus Group.

<sup>84</sup> CVC, Survey.

‘Where passion for God is weak, zeal for missions will be weak. Churches that are not centred on the exaltation of the majesty and beauty of God will scarcely kindle a fervent desire to ‘declare his glory among the nations’ (Psalm 96:3).<sup>85</sup>

As the congregation presents itself before God it discovers a triune and ‘sending’ God. As the Father sends the Son, and the Father and Son send the Spirit, so do the Father, Son and Spirit send the church into the world.

When we examine the Trinity we see centripetal and centrifugal factors at work. There is the centrifugal act of ‘sending’. God sends because he wants his glory to be made known to all people. According to Piper this sending nature of God does not have mission as its first priority but rather worship. God is passionate about glorifying himself. God’s ultimate goal is not mission; it is worship (Psalm 117:1; Ephesians 1:4-6; Isaiah 43:6-7; John 17:1). Out of the desire to glorify God’s self comes God’s impetus for sending so that others can ‘glorify him and enjoy him forever’ as the opening question of the Westminster Catechism encourages. The inevitable result of meeting with the triune God in corporate worship is that the church also becomes caught in the desire to glorify God and make God’s name known.

The centripetal example at work in the Trinity is the manner in which the three persons within the Godhead receive and embrace one another. The triune God models for the church what it is to live in community and invite others into the *perichoretic* dance of God’s life.<sup>86</sup>

This example of the social reality of God goes hand in hand with the missional or sending nature of God. As we consider how we ‘do church’ our ecclesiology is well served by being founded on a Trinitarian doctrine of God that emphasises the *perichoretic* activity of God.

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<sup>85</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), p. 12.

<sup>86</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (Harper: San Francisco, 1991), p. 272; Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

The social model of the Trinity espoused by Moltmann, and his development of the *perichoretic* aspect of divine life lays a template on which humanity can live. It offers a model of loving, giving, and equality, and brings a needed practicality to the doctrine of the Trinity. And it introduces us to a real and personal God, who lives in relation within himself, but invites us into that same open and expanding circle of love. This is a model for the church, one that recognises the value and necessity of community and then out of that place invites others to the join the dance with them.

Worship implicitly ends with a missional impetus. This is the ideal of Vineyard ecclesiology and worship at its best. And this is echoed where Smith begins his latest book in his Cultural Liturgies project *Imagining the Kingdom*:

‘The end of worship ... is the *end* of worship. The culmination of Christian worship is its s/ending. In this time of already-not-yet, the end and goal and *telos* of worship is being sent from this transformational encounter as God’s witnesses and image-bearers. Christian worship is not some religious silo for our private refuelling that replenishes our ‘inner’ life. It is not merely some duty we observe in order to keep our eternal ducks in a row; nor is it some special sequestered ‘experience’ that fills up a ‘religious’ compartment in our souls, unhooked from what we do in the world Monday through Friday. Worship isn’t a weekly retreat from reality into some escapist enclave; it is our induction into ‘the real world’. ... When worship ends on Sunday, it spills over into our cultural labor on Monday.’<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, pp. 2-3.

## **Conclusion**

Worship is a 'centripetal embrace' for God's people that brings focus, community, continuity and a climax to the week. But it is equally about centrifugal release and the need for encouragement, equipping, empowering, direction and missional impetus. The aspects of the corporate gathering that we have entitled the 'centripetal embrace' and 'centrifugal release' are important for both corporate worship and missional practice. These nine areas, while not being part of the central purpose of the Sunday gathering (which is to give God his 'worship'), are key 'side-effects' and need to be more clearly recognised and affirmed by church leaders. Their church members hold them as valued benefits of their church membership. They are part of worship as missional practice. Both centrifugal and centripetal factors need to feature in the intentional planning of worship.