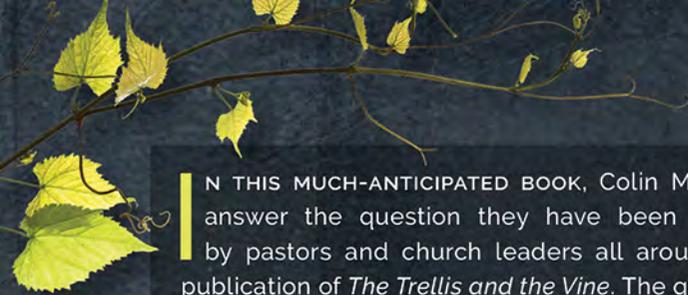


The Vine Project

SHAPING YOUR MINISTRY CULTURE
AROUND DISCIPLE-MAKING



**COLIN MARSHALL
AND TONY PAYNE**



IN THIS MUCH-ANTICIPATED BOOK, Colin Marshall and Tony Payne answer the question they have been asked countless times by pastors and church leaders all around the world since the publication of *The Trellis and the Vine*. The question goes like this:

Look, I've read your book, and it expresses what I have always thought about Christian ministry. But as I kept reading, I had this sinking feeling that what actually happens in our church is still a long way from the kind of disciple-making ministry vision you outline and that I believe in. So my question is this: *What can we do about it? How can we shape the whole culture of our church around disciple-making?*

In *The Vine Project*, Marshall and Payne provide a roadmap and resources for this sort of church-wide culture change. The book guides your ministry leadership team through a five-phase process for growth and change, with biblical input, practical ideas, resources, case studies, exercises and projects along the way. You will be helped to:

- clarify and sharpen your convictions (Phase 1)
- reform your own personal life to express these convictions (Phase 2)
- honestly evaluate every aspect of your current church (or ministry) culture (Phase 3)
- devise some key plans for change and put them into effect (Phase 4)
- keep the momentum going and overcome obstacles (Phase 5).

The Trellis and the Vine proposed a "ministry mind-shift that changes everything". *The Vine Project* shows how that mind-shift can and must shape every aspect of what you are doing as a congregation of Christ's people to make disciples of all nations.



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ISBN 978-1-925424-76-8



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The **Vine**
Project

About the authors

Colin Marshall has spent the past 45 years training men and women in the ministry of the gospel, both in university and local church contexts. He served as the CEO of the Ministry Training Strategy (MTS) and was the founder of the Vinegrowers ministry, helping pastors around the world to build disciple-making culture into their ministry. Colin is the author of *Growth Groups* and the co-author of *The Trellis and the Vine*. He is married to Jacquie, who has shared with him in this lifetime of ministry, and they have been blessed with three now adult children and five grandchildren.

Tony Payne has worked in Christian ministry, focusing on writing and publishing, for over 30 years. He is the author of many books, Bible studies and other resources, including *The Trellis and the Vine*, *The Course of Your Life*, and *Islam in our Backyard*. He is currently a ministry trainer and writer-in-residence at Campus Bible Study (UNSW), and a visiting lecturer at Moore College. His weekly newsletter and podcast is 'The Payneful Truth' (see thepaynefultruth.online). With his wife, Ali, he has five adult children and eight grandchildren.

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AROUND DISCIPLE-MAKING

COLIN MARSHALL
AND **TONY PAYNE**

 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

The Vine Project

Second edition

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First edition 2016

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ISBN 978 1 925424 76 8

Cover design and typesetting by Lankshear Design.



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Acknowledgements

Writing a book certainly focuses the mind. And writing a book about how to conduct ourselves as God's servants, in his church for the sake of Christ's name, really does focus the mind and the heart. Are we being true to God's revealed mind?

Tony and I did not write *The Vine Project* at our desks. The six years between writing *The Trellis and the Vine* and *The Vine Project* were like one continuous conversation about the Christian life, church and ministry. It was challenging, humbling, sometimes agonizing and mostly joyful. We're enormously thankful to the thousands of pastors and elders who joined in that conversation at workshops, conferences and seminars all around the world.

We also want to acknowledge particular people who invested time and thought in the conversation.

About 40 pastors took up my offer to be their ministry coach as they tried to implement the principles of *The Trellis and the Vine*. This firsthand experience of seeing very different churches grappling with new ways of thinking and behaving was invaluable.

A dozen pastors waded through the early versions of the material and gave detailed feedback and enough encouragement for us to keep going. This input sharpened our understanding of ministry and significantly shaped the final product.

Gary Bennetts, Stuart Holman and Greg Peisley spent a whole year using the early versions of this material, not only in their own churches but also as coaches in their neighbouring churches. Steve Lindemann equipped us to understand the process of culture change along the way. I looked forward to our monthly meetings as they helped us make the whole thing more usable (I hope).

Phil Colgan and Gary Koo, the pastors of the local churches where Tony and I were involved at the time, encouraged us to teach and experiment with these ideas because they are totally driven by the same convictions. We needed this space to work with people and groups as we wrote about ministry. Thank you, Phil and Gary.

We're also very grateful to the eight pastors who agreed to be interviewed at some length about their ministries, and to have excerpts from these conversations included in the book.

Andrew Heard and Craig Tucker spent hours reading through our draft manuscript and sending back detailed feedback. They have been living this project for many years as church pastors who derive ministry practice from deep theological reflection. They will continue their sharpening critique of this book long after publication, for all our benefit. Two other friends call for special mention. One of our young theologically sharp writers, Guan Un, laboured long and fruitfully on the subject of discipleship to produce papers that shaped what you're about to read. And since the book was first published in 2016, my colleague Craig Glassock has coached, consulted and conversed with hundreds of pastors and churches engaging in *The Vine Project*. He has had a front row seat in how to best lead and implement this type of culture change over time, and his passion for disciple-making knows no bounds.

We're also very much indebted to the team at Matthias Media (especially the managing editor, Emma Thornett), who have not only worked so hard to make this book a reality, but have exemplified its principles for nearly three decades in publishing ministry resources for disciple-making. In fact (as you will discover), we have been unable to resist referencing and commend-

ing Matthias Media resources at numerous points throughout the book. These are resources we know and trust—we hope you’ll bear with our homegrown bias and enthusiasm.

And what can I say about Tony? Simply that the final text is his. Someone had to pull this six-year conversation into a coherent whole. It had to be someone who has bled these convictions for decades and someone who has been studying and writing about these things forever. When I read Tony’s manuscript, I kept saying to myself, “Yes, that’s exactly what we want to say, and what under God needs to be said at this hour”.

To God be the glory.

CM, September 2021.

SETTING THE SCENE



The big question

We'd been talking together for the best part of a day. There were about 60 of us in the room, from a range of different churches in America's Midwest. And then one pastor stood up and asked the question that we have been asked countless times in the past six years.

"Look, I've read *The Trellis and the Vine*.¹ I thought it was great. It expressed what I have always thought and believed about Christian ministry. So bless you and thank you for writing it.

"But as I kept reading, I also had this sinking feeling in my gut. I just know that what actually happens in our church is a long ways from the kind of disciple-making ministry vision you outline and that I totally believe in. I'm not really sure how we came to be so far away from it. But the thing is: I don't really know where to start or how to make progress. It's like all the existing structures and ministries in our church are made of concrete.

"So here's my basic problem: *How can I change the whole culture of our church in the direction of disciple-making?*"

He was a Baptist from an average-sized church in Chicago, but he could have been a Presbyterian from Melbourne or an

1 Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-Shift that Changes Everything*, Matthias Media, Sydney, 2009.

evangelical Anglican from Cape Town. In conversations, emails, workshops and conferences, we've been asked a version of this question more times than we can remember since *The Trellis and the Vine* became an unlikely international bestseller.²

I say unlikely because, as far as we were concerned, *Trellis and Vine* was an unexciting little book that consisted mostly of the blindingly obvious. We thought it would be read by a small number of loyal folk here in Australia, and perhaps prove to be a useful statement of ministry principles that could be passed on to the next generation.

However, sometimes the obvious is what people most need to hear (like when the child said of the emperor, "But he's got nothing on!"). Somehow, our restatement of the biblical principles of 'vine work' and ministry struck a chord with evangelical pastors and leaders all around the world.

One of the consequences was an immensely rich experience for which we are deeply thankful to God. Over the past six years, we have found ourselves speaking at conferences and running 'Trellis and Vine Workshops' all over the world. We have had the joy of spending thousands of hours talking about ministry with thousands of pastors and lay leaders, from churches of all different sizes, locations, denominations and cultures—from Cape Town to Chicago, from Singapore to Sydney, from Dublin to Dallas.

People came to these workshops and conferences with all kinds of questions and thoughts about the philosophy of ministry put forward in *The Trellis and the Vine*. Three kinds of questions were particularly common:

- What do you actually mean by 'discipleship' and 'disciple-making'? Are you basically arguing for more one-to-one work, or small group work? Or are you talking about more evangelism? Or all or none of the above?

2 If you've never heard of, let alone read, *The Trellis and the Vine*, don't worry. You might find reading it a useful exercise, but you don't need to stop now and do so. Most of the essential theological and ministry principles are restated somewhere in what follows. If you're curious, we've provided a basic summary of the argument of *The Trellis and the Vine* in appendix i.

- Where does preaching fit into what you're saying? Won't your emphasis on 'training disciples' lead to a devaluing of expository preaching ministry—which is something we've been fighting so hard to defend and strengthen over the past generation?
- Have you ended up making 'trellises' (i.e. ministry structures and supports) the bad guys of church life? Is it possible you have underplayed the systemic importance of how church life is structured and organized? And does prioritizing 'vine work' over 'trellis work' lead to a demeaning of the many people who spend so many hours faithfully working on the 'trellis'?³

We've been enormously blessed by the iron-sharpens-iron effect of talking through these questions repeatedly with many different brothers and sisters. In the chapters that follow we hope the fruit of these conversations is seen in an improved and sharpened presentation of the essential ministry principles first enunciated in *The Trellis and the Vine*.

However, the overwhelming reason that people came to talk with us over the past six years was to grapple with the dilemma raised by the pastor from Chicago. In many churches around the world, there is an immensely dissatisfying gap between what we hope and expect the gospel will produce as it bears fruit among us, and what we actually see day to day and Sunday to Sunday. To put it in the terms that we argued for in *The Trellis and the Vine*, we long for Great-Commission style 'vine work' to be the normal agenda and priority within our churches. We yearn for every member of our congregation to grasp this and to live it—to pray for and reach out to those around them to make new disciples, and to nurture and edify and encourage one another to maturity in Christ.

And yet, when we look at the gap between this exciting biblical vision and the reality of church life, our hearts sometimes sink. Our local congregations seem so complex, and so stuck in existing habits and ways of doing things. The existing structures and

3 Again, for a quick summary of what we mean by 'trellis work' and 'vine work' see appendix i.

‘trellises’ of our church almost seem to have a life of their own. They absorb or assimilate or repel our attempts at reform and change. Maybe this talk of ‘vine work’ and of every disciple being a disciple-maker works somewhere else (on university campuses maybe) but it doesn’t seem to be catching on here. And if we’re honest about the numbers, we aren’t seeing much growth; and what little growth we see is largely the result of transfers rather than conversions.

We could multiply the examples, or tease out this sort of scenario at more length, but it would only inflame the sense of unease that many pastors, elders and core church members already feel. When we work hard but don’t see growth, it hurts. It leads us to grapple with God’s sovereignty (Why isn’t he giving the growth?), to compare ourselves with others (What’s wrong with me? Why are they doing so well?), and often to hop on the latest bandwagon program or ministry model hoping for success and growth at last.

As we’ve talked and thought constantly about these issues over the past six years, we’ve become convinced of the need to answer the question that the Baptist pastor from Chicago asked on behalf of nearly every evangelical church in the Western world: *How can we shift the whole culture of our church in the direction of disciple-making?*

That’s the question that *The Vine Project* is aiming to answer.

It may seem counterintuitive to say so, but one of the reasons we’re so keen to answer this question is that we know only too well of the enormous pressure that many pastors and church members are under. For many readers of this book, whether you are a keen lay leader or in full-time pastoral ministry, each week is a fresh struggle just to keep your head above water. We know this not only from our own life experience in ministry on church pastoral teams, but from the past six years of running workshops and coaching pastors and church leadership teams. We have constantly spoken with pastors and lay leaders who are grappling with energy-sapping, emotionally exhausting situations—everything from illness, grief and heartache in their own families to relational conflict, mental health issues and sexual abuse in the

church family. We find ourselves waiting for that crisis-free ‘normal’ year where we can actually do some planning and make progress, but it never quite arrives.

For those of us who feel this way, working on a project to shift the whole culture of our church may feel completely beyond us. And for some of you, that may be quite right. It may not be the right time to start. You may want to read this book and hatch some plans for getting started properly a year or two down the track.

However, as we will argue below, disciple-making is really about calling people to faith and hope in Jesus Christ in the midst of this present evil age, with all its pressures. To become a church more focused on disciple-making is to become a fellowship that understands more clearly why life is often hard, and what resources God has given us to grow in faith and hope and love in the midst of the struggle. A disciple-making church is actually better able to handle the crises and pressures of everyday life.

What’s more, one of the key pressure points for many pastors and church leadership teams is simply that there are too few shoulders being put to the wheel. We aren’t training and mobilizing enough of our members to be fellow workers in the task, and so the pressure on the pastor and key leaders remains unrelenting. We need to build a larger team of engaged, equipped disciple-makers working together, and this is one of the key outcomes of *The Vine Project*.

In other words, one very important reason that we’ve written *The Vine Project*, and urge you to embark upon it as soon as you reasonably can, is that we know how tough church life and ministry can be.

An unusual book

It’s a big question that we’re seeking to answer (*how to shift your church culture towards disciple-making*), and the task is made less easy by the obvious fact that *each church needs its own answer*. Each

church is at a different point on the spectrum, has different strengths and weaknesses, faces different obstacles, and, crucially, has different people whom God has blessed it with. Some of you may look at your church and see the need for root-and-branch reform; others may feel that you're broadly heading in the right direction but need an injection of growth and change. Some of you may even be at the point of planting a brand new church, and be in a position to start shaping the culture from scratch.

And yet despite our different starting points, the essential process of change, the tools of change, and the desired outcomes for change are common across all churches, because they have their roots not only in the way that groups of people (like churches) function and grow, but in the character and purposes and acts of God for his people.

That's why (somewhat unusually) we've called this book a 'project'. It's not a set of detailed answers or prescriptions delivered from on high to solve your problems. It's a set of processes, tools and guidelines for you to work through with a small team of like-minded fellow workers—starting from wherever you happen to be, with whatever strengths and weaknesses you happen to have.

This means that *The Vine Project* is *not a book just to read*, like all those other ministry books that you buy at conferences and read and feel mildly enthused by for a time, but which ultimately go to their home on the shelf with all the others. It's a project. It outlines a process to work through and talk over. It's a book that should lead to a plan and to actions taking place over time.

This is why it's a book that is likely to take you several years to finish—not, we hasten to add, because the content is vastly long or complex, but because the *process* it guides you through is not a quick fix. Church growth and change, like all Christian growth and change, takes time. It takes real-world implementation and patience. It is liable to false starts and hiccups. It needs constant monitoring and review and changes of direction to account for new or unexpected circumstances. At regular points in what follows, you'll be prompted to talk things over, evaluate your current circumstances, devise plans, take action, work on mini-projects,

and so on. It's a process that will take months and years to complete. In fact, in some respects this is a book you'll never finish. We fervently hope that *The Vine Project* will not end up being just another of those ministry books that you browse through, pick up a few interesting insights from, and then cast aside.

This is also a book that you *cannot successfully read on your own*. Unless you gather a small group of godly, committed people to read this book with you, and to work through the process with you, then we're pretty sure it will do you and your church little good. Of course, we understand that in order to decide whether you want to gather such a group of people and launch into *The Vine Project* together, you may want to read through the book first yourself! But our point is simply that in order for what follows to lead to any actual growth or change in your church culture, you will need to work through it all with a team.

To make this process easier—of gathering a team and working through each phase of *The Vine Project* together over time—we're providing you with support. At **library.thevineproject.com** you'll find not only a growing library of videos, stories, articles and case studies, but also a community of other ministry teams who are all working on 'Vine Projects' in their own context. It's a place to ask questions, to learn from the experiences and insights of others, and to contribute your own.

Library.thevineproject.com is also where team members can download their free team manual. This manual (available in PDF and MS Word formats) contains all the discussion questions, evaluations, activities and mini-projects from this book, so that you can reformat them, print them out, scribble on them, type in answers, and so on.

We strongly encourage you to make the most of the support available at **library.thevineproject.com**. (For more information, see appendix ii or visit the website.)

How to make the best use of this book

It should be pretty clear by this point that this is a book to *use* and not just read, because answering the Big Question in your own context will require a thoughtful process over time, not a silver-bullet prescription from some ministry guru.

Here are a few pointers on how to make the best use of *The Vine Project*.

Firstly, the process we outline is not just for churches. It's for any ministry that has the potential to have its culture changed in the direction of disciple-making. For example, you may be reading this as a youth ministry leader, or as the leader of your church's men's or women's ministry. You may be the leader of a para-church mission group or fellowship of some kind. If you are leading a group of Christians, and have the authority and capacity to shape the direction and activities of that group over time, then *The Vine Project* is for you.

In fact, even if you are reading this as the senior pastor of a church, you may wish to run a pilot 'Vine Project' in just one part of your congregational life (say, in the youth ministry or in one of the congregations that make up your overall parish or church) before rolling it out more broadly.

Secondly, *The Vine Project* is not just for existing churches and fellowships. If you're about to start something brand new—whether a new church plant, or a new ministry of some other kind—working through *The Vine Project* is an ideal way to establish a strong disciple-making culture from the outset. Most of the suggested exercises and activities in *The Vine Project* assume an existing ministry in which you're seeking to bring a culture change—but nearly all of them are very easily adaptable to a new ministry starting from scratch.

Thirdly, whatever your context, the first step for you as a ministry leader of some kind is to read through the whole book yourself to get a sense of its theology and message, and of the process we're going to work through. This first read through has two main purposes:

- Obviously enough, you need to be convinced personally that you want to utilize this book, and its process, for bringing lasting culture change to your church or ministry. You need to be comfortable that you are on the same page as us theologically (at least in all the important areas, if not on every particular), and that our suggested process is one you're willing to commit to.
- You'll also start to get a sense, on this first read through, of who you might want to have on your Vine Project Team, as well as where you might want to modify or adapt or supplement the content for your own context—because we're pretty sure you'll want to. We have designed *The Vine Project* to be as flexible and applicable as possible to a multitude of different ministry contexts, but there will doubtless be topics you want to cover that are absent, as well as things we've covered that don't apply to you or that you'd want to handle differently. This first read through will no doubt generate a little list of these customizations that you'd like to make.

Fourthly, as we've already mentioned, a key aspect of *The Vine Project* is assembling a small team of fellow workers to work through the process together; to be the team of change agents who plan and initiate and exemplify and champion the change in culture that you're wanting to achieve. Who should be on this team?

- No more than ten people, and no fewer than four. It's a team that needs to function well as a group, with enough people to bring ideas and energy and capability to the task, but not too many that meetings are hard to organize or that group dynamics become difficult.
- You may look for people already in a position of leadership or oversight (like a body of elders or a parish council or similar authorized body) but it's also important to look further than your existing eldership in considering who to invite onto this team. Change requires fresh thinking, fresh energy, and a willingness to try something new—and this can be hard for an existing leadership team to embrace.

(After all, they are usually the ones most invested in everything that is currently in place.) You may put before your existing elders the idea of forming a new team to focus on *The Vine Project*—perhaps consisting of some existing key leaders (or elders), as well as some emerging leaders with potential.

- Whatever the mix of new and existing leaders in your team, or however they relate to your current structures, the really important thing is that they are F.A.T. (to use the old acronym)—Faithful, Available (at least potentially) and Teachable. You want people who are Faithful to the gospel in their convictions and in their lives. This is not the time or place for new converts (no matter how gifted and impressive they are), or for powerful, influential people who are really not solidly converted, mature, gospel-hearted people. You'll want people whom you can call upon to be Available to work with you and each other, and to keep working together over a significant period of time. This may mean freeing them from other responsibilities—in fact, it will almost certainly mean this, given the way F.A.T. people usually get involved in church life. There may be some pain associated with this—with pulling a leader out of an existing ministry, and thus creating a hole—but unless you have a team of people who are available to meet together fairly regularly, and to put in some work together to bring change, then the whole exercise will probably end up being an unproductive talkfest. And finally, you don't need people who have arrived and already know how to do everything, or who have strong hobbyhorses that they are continually riding. You want people who have a humble Teachable heart, who know they still have a long way to go, and who are keen to keep making progress as disciples of Christ.

Fifthly, once you've gathered a team, one of your first tasks will be to draft a rough plan together as to how you are going to work through the five phases of *The Vine Project*. How often are you

going to meet initially, and for how long each time? At what pace do you want to work through each phase? We've put together a suggested plan of attack (at the end of the next chapter), but feel free to modify this according to your circumstances.

And *finally*, to make best use of this book, and to answer the Big Question most effectively for your own context, keep bathing the whole process in prayer. We'll keep reminding you about this at various points, because we strongly suspect that you're like us and every Christian leader we've ever known—prayer gets squeezed out by the pressures and busyness of church life. All Christian ministry, including the project on which we're about to embark, should take its cue from Paul's summary of his ministry in Colossians 1:28-29:

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

We need to keep praying for Christ's energy to work powerfully within us, for his Spirit to guide us as we think and plan, and for God to give the growth as we devise new ways of planting and watering.