

The **Small Group** and the Vine

FOUNDATIONAL TRAINING FOR **GROUP LEADERS**

**Tony Payne and
Marty Sweeney**



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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

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Contents

Introduction and welcome	5
Session 1: Understanding small groups	9
Session 2: Understanding your role as leader	15
Session 3: Leading people to God's word	21
Session 4: Leading in prayer	29
Session 5: Persevering with people	33
Appendix 1: Two simple frameworks for Bible reading	37
Appendix 2: How to be in a growth group	43
Appendix 3: How to use pre-written Bible studies	47
Appendix 4: Help your growth group grow closer together	51
Appendix 5: Ezra and the principle of de-termination	53
Appendix 6: Prayer in the growth group	57
Appendix 7: More thoughts about prayer in growth groups	67
Appendix 8: Praying out loud: practical tips	71
Appendix 9: The discouraging problem of poor attendance	77
Appendix 10: Making hard phone calls	81

Introduction and welcome

Welcome to *The Small Group and the Vine*.

Our expectation is that you are probably new to leading a small group, and this course is your preparation for that exciting and rewarding role. But it's also possible that you might be an experienced leader who has decided to do the course as a bit of a refresh or reboot. Either way, it is good to have you along, and we hope and pray that this is a really useful investment of your time.

We want to mention a few little things before we get started:

- As you will see, in this course we use the phrase 'moving people to the right' as a shorthand way of describing the progression people make as disciples of Christ. It's a shorthand based on a diagram we use to describe how people grow as they become disciples and are transformed more and more into maturity in Christ. In our diagram, the goal is to *move people to the right*. The phrase is not intended in any way as a description of people's political leanings! We hope this isn't the case, but it could be that in your context even once you explain the intended meaning of the phrase in this course, it just has too much political baggage for you to use it as helpful shorthand. If so, you just need to use your own memorable shorthand way of talking about that process of growing people as disciples. For example, in the videos you'll notice we use 'moving towards maturity' or 'moving towards Christ' interchangeably with 'moving to the right'.
- You'll notice that we are encouraging you to do a bit of 'homework' in the form of reading Tony's book, *The Thing Is* (Matthias Media). This isn't to help Tony make some extra pocket money (he doesn't get any

royalties). It's because the book goes into more depth than we can here about the 'big picture' of what God is doing in our world, what he's doing in *people*, and the part we play in that divine plan. It's only a short book, but we think it will be a very helpful supplement to this short course. In fact, if you go to www.matthiasmedia.com/tti.html you'll see that we have a very special offer for you.

- We've added a whole lot of bonus input for you in the appendix section of this workbook. We hope you'll benefit from some of the articles there about the practicalities of leading a small group. Up that back end of the book we'll also tell you about some of the other resources Matthias Media has available to help you.
- We also want to acknowledge our indebtedness to Colin Marshall for his insightful thinking over many years on effective small groups, including his book *Growth Groups* (Matthias Media). If you want more guidance on your role as a small group leader, we certainly recommend his book very highly. It contains 15 very useful training topics for small group leaders, and can be used as further follow-on training for those doing this course.
- Our thanks to the many people who gave us feedback and suggestions on the course content, and special thanks to Bill Schotten for his expertise in shooting the video and attempting to make us look good on screen.

But enough of the preliminaries. Let's get on with the course.

Tony Payne and Marty Sweeney

Why *The Small Group and the Vine*?

We've called this course *The Small Group and the Vine* because in it we apply the theological convictions about Christian ministry that I (Tony) articulated with Colin Marshall in our book *The Trellis and the Vine* (Matthias Media, 2009).

In *The Trellis and the Vine* (T&V) we explain that the basic work of any Christian ministry is to preach the biblical gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of God's Spirit, and to see people converted, changed and grow to maturity in that gospel. This is where the life and power of all ministry is to be found: in the prayerful, Spirit-backed speaking of the message of the Bible by one person to another (or to more than one).

In T&V we liken this vibrant, dynamic, gospel growth to a spreading, fruitful vine, taking our cue from the imagery that Paul uses in Colossians 1:5-6. Accordingly we described the essential work of ministry—of making disciples of Jesus through the prayerful speaking of the word—as the 'vine work' that all Christians are called to take part in, each in our own way.

And just as some sort of framework or trellis is needed to help vines grow, so Christian ministries also need some structure and support. It may not be much, but at the very least we need somewhere to meet, some Bibles to read from, and some basic structures of leadership within our group. All Christian churches, fellowships and ministries have some kind of 'trellis' that gives shape and support to the work. These trellises may be administrative and managerial in nature (e.g. finances, infrastructure, organization, property, governance) or they may be 'ministry trellises' (e.g. organized groups, events, activities or meetings in which vine work can happen).

One of the very common features of church life is for 'trellises' to become too important, or to take on a life of their own, or to lose touch with their reason for existing. We forget why a particular structure or meeting or activity was set up. In fact, we can end up running trellises that don't actually facilitate much vine work at all. (This was one of T&V's significant arguments.)

Perhaps you can see why we've called this course *The Small Group and the Vine*. It's very possible—in fact, in our experience it's alarmingly common—for churches to run small groups that are like trellises on which a bedraggled vine is struggling to grow. As a structure, the group exists and runs; but it has lost focus on its central reason for being.

Our prayer is that this course will equip you to lead small groups where the vine grows and flourishes through the prayerful speaking of the word of God.

Session 1

Understanding small groups

Watch: Introduction

Read and discuss

1. In your own experience of small groups:
 - a. When a small group has functioned really well, what have you appreciated about it?

 - b. What sorts of things have you *not* appreciated about small groups you've been part of?

To understand what purpose God has in mind for small groups, we need to first clarify what our whole lives are about. This is because God's will for us in small groups is part of his will for us more generally—it's not some special or separate area. In other words, the task of clarifying what small groups are really all about begins with clarifying what God's big plan is for the world, and for us in particular.

2. Read Colossians 1:1-23.

a. In verses 5-6, the gospel almost has a life of its own. What is the gospel doing?

b. What has the gospel done or produced in the Colossians' lives (vv. 6, 12-14)?

c. What does Paul hope and pray they will continue in/grow in (vv. 9-12)?

d. Who is the Son? What is his place in God's plans (vv. 13-20)?

2. Have a go at crafting a short vision statement for the small group you're going to lead. Like this: "I would love to be part of a small group where we do [these things...] with the result that [this happens...]."

3. You might have noticed that the purposes we have been looking at could just as well apply to our larger Sunday gatherings.
 - a. In what ways do you think small groups are similar to our main Sunday church gatherings in their purposes and in what they do to achieve those purposes? In what ways are they different?

 - b. In what areas do you think small groups are particularly effective?

Watch: Conclusion

Pray

Give thanks for what God has done in Christ and for what we've seen of his amazing purposes, and pray for your understanding, trust and participation in these purposes.

Homework

We've covered lots of huge ideas in this session. To wrap your head around them, read chapters 1-3 of *The Thing Is*. (See the introduction for more about this book.)

One of the issues we had to wrestle with as we put this course together was what to call the groups we are talking about, because there are so many different names used: cell groups, home fellowships, Bible study groups, connect groups, and so on.

We've started off just using the somewhat generic term 'small groups' so that at least most people will know what we're talking about.

Now, in one sense it doesn't matter what we call them if everyone knows what we mean. But in another sense, it *does* matter—because what we call things shapes our view of them and communicates what we think and believe about their nature and purpose.

In which case, maybe 'small group' is a slightly ineffective name; it doesn't really communicate the purposes we've been looking at in this session.

We aren't going to be prescriptive with the name. But to signal that our groups have a particular goal and purpose—to move people to the right—we're going to call them 'Growth Groups' from this point on in our course. They are groups that help people grow in Christ and towards maturity in Christ, one step at a time.