

# The World Is Our Vineyard

## Clergy Discipline and Accountability

The fifteenth chapter of John's Gospel contains rich imagery of the vine and the branches, an image that would have been obvious to those who labored in vineyards and enjoyed the fruit of the vine. "I am the vine, you are the branches," he teaches his disciples. We draw our strength, our life, from him: "I am the vine you are the branches and apart from me," he says, "you can do nothing." Jesus then gives a command and invitation, that we should "love one another." Christianity is always incarnational—it takes on human flesh.

Then Jesus concludes with a necessary implication. We are connected with God, and we are in communion with each other for a larger purpose: a calling in the world. "You did not choose me," Jesus says, "I chose you." "I appointed you to go and bear fruit."

What does it mean to bear fruit?<sup>1</sup> Those who heard this teaching for the first time, the disciples of Jesus, would have heard these words and placed them in their Mediterranean context. The fruit of the vine produces figs, grapes, olives. These finally become food, oils, wine. But vineyards are primarily for the purpose of making wine.

It is not accidental that the Scriptures are filled with the imagery of vineyards and wine, with the cycles of planting and nurturing and harvesting, with celebrations where wine is freely poured and enjoyed. When those who listened to Jesus heard his references to vineyards and wine, they would have immediately made the connections: the labor, the cultivation, the pruning, the growth, the fruit, the abundance, the feast. In a vineyard, one experiences life in all of its fullness.

And so Jesus makes the claim, of himself, that he is the vine. I have come that you may have life and have it in abundance, he had announced to them. To abide in Jesus is to remain connected to him. When we lose that connection, when the branch is severed from the vine, there is no life, no growth, no fruit. "I want you to abide in me," he is saying. "I want you to remain connected to me." Why does he say this?

Kenneth H. Carter Jr.

The reasons go deeper than mystical experience and personal piety. We remain connected to the vine because that is the way we bear fruit. And here the inward spiritual grace becomes an outward and visible sign. The natural consequence of a healthy root taking in nutrients is that it produces something wonderful. It bears fruit.

Jesus had been with the disciples for some time—a significant amount of time with just a few people, hidden mostly from the crowds, investing all of this time in twelve people. He was teaching them about friendship with God, which involved prayer and the reading of scripture. He sensed that there were dynamics going on between them, struggles over who would sit in the places of power and over whose voice would be heard most clearly. And so he gave them a command and an invitation: love one another.

But it was always about more than an individual's spiritual life, or a group of people and their love for each other. He wanted the disciples to bear fruit; he wanted their lives to make a difference.

What does it mean to bear fruit for a winemaker? Winemakers would want to make enough bottles of wine for their own enjoyment, and maybe to share with others, and maybe for profit. Bearing fruit would mean a number of bottles of wine,

a number that we would count. But bearing fruit also has to do with what is inside the bottles. We could make a large number of bottles of wine, but what is inside them could be mediocre. Or, at the other extreme, we could spend all of our time making a very few bottles of wine that are exceptional, but only a few people would enjoy them.

Which is bearing fruit? Bearing fruit is making wonderful wine that can be shared at feasts and celebrations but also in everyday life, at common meals. To bear fruit is to be sustained through the highs and lows, the ups and downs, the amazing and the ordinary.

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When I hear Jesus say that “I appointed you to go and bear fruit,” a word occurs to me: accountability. We are accountable to Jesus, for the life we have received from him. Sometimes accountability can be measured, and sometimes it cannot be measured. What is important is that we allow the grace of God to be poured out through us. We allow the inward and spiritual grace to become an outward and visible sign. The wine is to be shared, following the example of Jesus, who said at the Passover feast, “This is my body, given for you, this is my blood, poured out for you.”

Jesus wanted the disciples to bear fruit; he wanted their lives to mean something. He did recognize that the world was a vineyard. Catherine of Sienna was a fourteenth-century Italian spiritual guide who wrote a series of dialogues or visions. In one of them she reflected on the meaning of the blood of Christ poured out for her and the responsibility we have in receiving that gift. In her vision God hires workers to labor in the vineyard of the church—we think of Matthew 20 here—each worker has a vineyard, a soul, in which some things are pruned and uprooted, and other things are nurtured. The vines within each person are all grafted into the One Vine. But then she says, “Everyone is joined to your neighbor’s vineyards without any dividing lines. They are so joined together, in fact, that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbors.”<sup>2</sup>

How are our vines joined together, and what does that have to do with bearing fruit? United Methodist clergy live in covenant with each other. United Methodist congregations and institutions share a connection with each other. These relationships flourish as we live in a friendship with Jesus, as we love one another, and as we focus on our calling, to bear fruit.

To be honest, I prefer not to be the judge of whether we are bearing fruit. God will take care of that. But there are some things we can measure. The following indicators seem helpful to me in reflecting on the fruitfulness of my own local congregation.

1. Full membership
2. Average worship attendance
3. Average Sunday school attendance
4. Number of baptisms

5. Number of youth in confirmation
6. Number of adult professions of faith or reaffirmations of faith
7. Number of deaths
8. Number of persons in spiritual growth/discipleship groups
9. Number of major missional initiatives
10. Number of persons served in mission
11. Full acceptance of annual conference apportionments

These eleven measurements give a broad indication of how we are doing as a congregation in terms of mission in the vineyard. The major missional initiatives are somewhat subjective, but these are ministries that require substantial staff and member support in terms of time and money. The persons served in mission are people with whom the church shares ministry and who are not our members, for example, participants in AA or a children’s weekday school or guests in homeless shelters. Persons in spiritual growth/discipleship groups are individuals in youth fellowship, choirs, and *Disciple* and *Beginnings* groups.

The other numbers are self-explanatory, and of significance would be the relation of some numbers to others; for example, the ratio of births to deaths, or Sunday school attendance to worship attendance. This set of variables approaches a way of measuring the strengths of a local church and also shows us our areas for growth. In addition, these variables express the Wesleyan genius of connecting personal and social holiness.

I am aware that there are dimensions of ministry that cannot be measured, that are hidden, acts of grace or justice or reconciliation known only to God. And yet this truth does not prevent us from engaging in the difficult process of speaking the truth about who we are. The absence of professions of faith in many of our congregations and an inability to identify persons served in mission are symptoms of a deeper crisis: a lack of connection with Jesus.

Faithful clergy remind congregations and communities that we are stewards of the vineyard. Sometimes we can measure the fruitfulness, acknowledging that God gives the growth. We each have a stake in this vineyard. My inclination is to want to measure the fruitfulness because I am caught up in the American way of wanting to quantify everything. There is a discipline to that, a discipline that makes us more efficient, perhaps even better stewards. But the harvest, finally, is God’s to judge. God will measure our fruitfulness. Jesus simply calls us bear fruit. □

1. For a very helpful reflection on what this means for congregations, see Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Abingdon Press, 2007).
2. Quoted in Wendy Wright, “The Vineyard of The Lord,” *Weavings*, September/October, 2001, 19.

**Kenneth H. Carter Jr. is pastor of Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. He is a member of the Ministry Study Commission and the author of *A Way of Life in the World: Spiritual Practices for United Methodists*.**



**Q. 83 and 84  
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