

The Legacy of a Humble Hero

John Wimber died 10 years ago. Today the Vineyard movement that he started is experiencing both pruning and new growth.

From musician and original band member of the hit vocal duo The Righteous Brothers to world-renowned pastor known for his Hawaiian shirts and laid-back Southern California ministry style, John Wimber created quite a legacy. He inspired a renewed interest in the Holy Spirit among evangelical churches globally and popularized such phrases as “signs and wonders” and “power evangelism.”

Yet he left behind a youthful movement caught in the middle of shifting tides, struggling to be defined and seeking the next wave of the Holy Spirit.

Wimber’s dramatic encounter with God in 1964 led him from the pop-music industry to an evangelistic ministry. He and wife Carol personally led hundreds of young people to Christ while attending a Quaker church, and after a few years he was made assistant pastor of his home congregation, the Yorba Linda (California) Friends Church.

When the church underwent phenomenal growth, Wimber’s evangelistic gifts drew the attention of Peter Wagner, who was developing the Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in nearby Pasadena. Wagner made him director of the department of church growth at Fuller, a position Wimber held from 1974 to 1978.

The Wimbbers also were developing a home-group ministry at the time. However, Carol’s baptism in the Holy Spirit soon catapulted the couple toward a new twist in their spiritual

journey.

John could see that the changing tide in his home was carrying them away from the Friends church and into uncharted waters. He soon realized it was time to depart from his positions with the Yorba Linda church and Fuller Seminary to become a full-time pastor with the Calvary Chapel churches.

An International Platform

During that time, Wimber invited a young hippie minister named Lonnie Frisbee to preach in his new church, and all heaven broke loose. During the service on Mother's Day 1980, Frisbee prayed, "Come, Holy Spirit," and youth ended up sprawled on the floor under the power of the Holy Spirit. Healings broke out, and tongues were heard through the loudspeaker.

Wimber soon gained visibility worldwide and began an international renewal movement among evangelical churches.

During this time, Ken Gulliksen, a pastor from the Calvary Chapel church in Costa Mesa, California, moved to Los Angeles with his wife to plant a new church. Gulliksen called his congregation the Vineyard, based on Isaiah 27:2-3: "In that day sing to her, 'A vineyard of red wine! I, the Lord, keep it, I water it every moment; lest any hurt it, I keep it night and day'" (NKJV).

Among those who gravitated toward the Vineyard were musicians, all of them famous today—Keith Green, who accepted Christ during one of Gulliksen's Bible studies, Bob Dylan, Debbie Boone, Randy Stonehill and Larry Norman.

Eventually, the Wimbbers' evangelistic efforts, ministry to the hippie culture, and teachings on the presence and power of God were marked with signs and wonders. The couple took a new step and left the Calvary Chapel movement to affiliate with Gulliksen's Vineyard.

Not long after, Wimber became the leader of the rapidly growing Vineyard movement. His emphasis on power evangelism drew a second invitation for him to work at Fuller Seminary.

The movement's big wave peaked during the 1980s when Wimber taught a "Signs, Wonders & Church Growth" course at Fuller, drawing many evangelical leaders into personal encounters with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Vineyard was incorporated in 1985, and although the leadership resisted the formation of a denominational structure, church planting became a key focus for the movement. Wimber envisioned 10,000 Vineyard churches planted around the world.

"Signs and Wonders" conferences held at the Anaheim (California) Vineyard Christian Fellowship pastored by Wimber released healing and deliverance en masse to seekers from around the world.

Amid the success and the controversy created by his powerful meetings, Wimber not only led the movement and pastored the large Anaheim church but also launched Vineyard Music International, which did much to make contemporary worship popular in evangelical churches.

The stress took a toll on his health, however. In 1986 he suffered a heart attack. In 1993 he was diagnosed with cancer, and in 1995 he suffered a stroke.

Many believed that the Vineyard movement would not survive after Wimber died in 1997 of a massive brain hemorrhage. Indeed, the group of churches have struggled against the ebb tide of Wimber's legacy. But it seems they have regrouped, and individual Vineyard churches are not only catching the incoming tide of the Holy Spirit but also redefining the next wave that will propel the movement forward.

Changes in the Wind

Wimber worked to create a framework of values that would define the Vineyard movement as a whole, though each church operates autonomously. The main values he espoused include biblical teaching; contemporary worship; the gifts of the Holy Spirit; signs, wonders and healing; active small-group ministry to the poor; evangelistic outreach; and equipping the saints in areas of personal discipleship and ministry.

The challenge for the Vineyard, he believed, would be to find a way of sustaining renewal that would enable the churches to be re-energized by the Holy Spirit—a way to enable them to catch future waves of His presence and power.

According to Burt Waggoner, national director of the U.S. Association of Vineyard Churches, Wimber's passing initially caused the movement to wane. However, the incoming tide indicates God is still moving throughout the churches and that the stated values of the Vineyard are still intact.

As evidence that God's blessing remains on the movement, Waggoner cites a resurgence in church planting; an emphasis on building loving communities; people coming to Christ in larger numbers; and several churches with congregations of

5,000-10,000 members. Waggoner told Charisma that more Vineyard church plants have occurred outside the U.S. than within the country.

“In the past 10 years, we have increased the total number of Vineyards by 150 churches,” he says. “Most of that growth has been overseas with Vineyards now planted in 60 nations.”

Currently there are about 650 churches in the U.S. and about 800 international congregations, Waggoner says.

To Wimber’s original list of stated values have been added new ones of becoming culturally relevant. The Vineyard church in Boise, Idaho, has grown significantly in the last decade, and its impact on raising awareness about environmental issues and calling the church to be better stewards of the earth has filtered through to other churches affiliated with The Vineyard.

Addressing issues of social justice, such as protecting children at risk, and rethinking the bounds of ministry, such as releasing women into positions of church-government authority, are other emphases that have joined the list of Vineyard values.

“These are reflections of the movement of the Holy Spirit that make us, as a people, relevant to what is taking place in the world and to expressions of the kingdom,” Waggoner says.

Regional Overseer of Midwest Vineyards Happy Lehman is leading the way by ordaining women as senior pastors—something Wimber would not do. “Wimber affirmed women in ministry, but his position was that he could not ordain women if ordination is

concerned with governing, not ministering,” Lehman told Charisma. “And he had a couples focus—a woman eventually could be ordained as a pastor so long as her husband was the senior pastor.”

In 2006 the Association of Vineyard Churches passed a board resolution that women could be ordained. Although a few Vineyard congregations left the movement over the issue, Lehman has since ordained three women as senior pastors and released one single woman to plant a church in the Midwest.

“Women are cultured to be caretakers,” Lehman says. “Women make phenomenally good caretaking pastors. They do better than men.”

“We have opened up huge possibilities for women,” he adds. “It’s not only right biblically but culturally.”

The New Expectancy

Just a few years before Wimber died, the Toronto (Ontario) Airport Vineyard experienced a renewal led by its pastor, John Arnott, that shook the world and became known as the Toronto Blessing.

Like a tsunami of change, it swept not only thousands of people into the move of the Holy Spirit but also many Canadian churches out of the Vineyard movement after Wimber, concerned that the churches were departing from traditional Vineyard values, attempted to rein in the revival.

“We lost a quarter of our churches that left to become part of

Toronto's network of churches," says Gary Best, overseer of the Association of Vineyard Churches in Canada. "It was a huge hit for us.

"We went through some very difficult years. It was a miracle we survived."

Not only have the Canadian Vineyards survived, they also appear to be redefining what the newest work of the Holy Spirit looks like in the far North.

This rising hope is fueled, Best says, by the increasing number of Vineyard churches in Canada. Testimonies of healing are also increasing, with three documented cases of people healed of cancer this year. Conferences titled "Naturally Supernatural" are being held throughout the provinces.

"I don't think we are in a better place in terms of sense of expectancy," Best says.

Unification is occurring as well, as new definitions of the movement becoming a family rather than a network of churches seem to be re-energizing the Canadian Vineyard movement.

"We're becoming a spiritual, relational family," Best explains. "There is not much commitment in a network of churches. An interdependent community is much stronger. There's more sense of loyalty and commitment to one another."

The Canadian Vineyard movement represents a new level of inclusiveness, bringing together cell-church networks, multicongregational models and traditional churches.

"We have 60 to 80 churches, depending on how we define the family relationships," Best notes. "We've grown by about 10 percent in the last two years. Five percent a year is about as good as it gets in Canada."

Although the Vineyard emphasis on worship, outreach to the poor and evangelism have become core values expressed throughout the movement in North America, Wimber's focus on signs and wonders seemingly is superseded by an emphasis among the churches to build loving communities of worshipers and be culturally relevant. Culturally relevant communities are viewed as acceptable to mainstream evangelicals and charismatics who seek to avoid extreme expressions of signs, wonders and power evangelism.

Many who have watched the Vineyard struggle to define itself in the last decade believe that in the movement's quest to incorporate values into the radical middle it has lost its cutting edge. Others believe that the current emphasis on building loving communities will enable the movement to catch and sustain an even greater measure of power as the waves of the Holy Spirit build in the coming years.

Gary Best sums up the feeling of most Vineyard pastors about the future of their movement: "We're trying to preserve the heart that John gave us," he says. "If we can have that heart continue generation after generation, we'll be doing well."

Julia C. Loren is a journalist, author and inspirational speaker. She is a frequent contributor to Charisma and lives in California.

Miracles Are Not Complicated

You can't learn how to heal the sick by reading a book or mastering a technique. You just believe what Jesus promised.

By John Wimber

During my years of praying for the sick, I've often been asked, "Did you experience a miraculous healing that led you into this ministry?" "Have you had a visitation from an angel?" "Did a divine healer lay hands on you and impart his anointing to you?" These kinds of questions presupposed a theology that to participate in Jesus' ministry I needed a unique spiritual experience to initiate my own.

My response to such questions was simple: "No. It's in the Book, so I do it." I was obeying Scripture because I believed that if Jesus said it and did it, then I should do it. This is important because it answers a common criticism that some have leveled at others and at me.

Some contend that we start with our experience and then turn to Scripture to support it. The exact opposite was true for me. Instead, I started with the Bible, especially the Gospels.

I chose to obey the commands of Jesus without knowing whether or not we would see any results. And it was only when I tried to emulate Jesus' words and works in my life that my experience changed.

I did not have a climactic moment of holy electricity that caused me to find texts to support my experience. Every week I would teach from Scripture and then I would give an opportunity for people who needed prayer for healing to come

forward.

At one point, I became completely discouraged. We had been praying for the sick for nine months and had yet to see anyone healed of anything, not even a headache! Some of our friends left the church out of frustration and irritation.

I wanted to quit. How could I keep teaching on healing when no results were backing it up?

It was then I sensed the Lord asking me, "Do you want to teach My Word or your experience?" I knew the answer. There was no turning back. Whether or not Jesus ever answered our prayers for healing, it was my job to obey His mandate.

After that dry spell the Lord finally healed a woman with the flu. I remember hooting to the Lord, "We got one! All right!" And the flow hasn't stopped since.

We cannot do or teach less than what is in the Bible. The reason all Christians can effectively pray for the sick and suffering is because we are empowered by the Holy Spirit, which is very important in healing ministry. "'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,'" Jesus told the disciples shortly before Pentecost (Acts 1:8, NKJV).

God's power, not human power, is the source of all divine healing. Our responsibility is to open our lives to the Spirit, to trust and honor Him, and to receive His power in our midst.

When Jesus was on earth, He functioned as a healer everywhere

He went. Forty-one distinct instances of physical and mental healing are recorded in the four Gospels, but this by no means represents the total.

Many of these references summarize the healing of large numbers of people. The accounts described in detail are simply the more dramatic instances of His healing ministry.

Toward the end of his account of the life and ministry of the Savior, the apostle John writes: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book. ... If they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 20:30-31; 21:25).

Nearly one-fifth of the Gospel accounts are devoted to Jesus' healing ministry and the discussion occasioned by it. Out of 3,779 verses in the four Gospels, 727 relate specifically to the healing of physical and mental illness or the resurrection of the dead. Except for a discussion about miracles in general, the attention devoted to the healing ministry of Jesus is far greater than that devoted to any other kind of experience.

Jesus came not only to bring the kingdom of God—to save and to heal people—but also to impart to others this healing ministry that they might share in bringing people under the rule of God. We, as the church, were commissioned by Jesus almost 2,000 years ago to announce the good news to all creation through the healing signs that would accompany and authenticate the message wherever it was preached.

Learning How To Heal

The most fundamental skill required for healing is openness to the Holy Spirit, emptying oneself and receiving His leading and power. Frequently I encounter people who want a method for healing, a formula they can follow that guarantees them automatic healings. But divine healing is neither automatic nor dependent on our right actions; it is rooted in a relationship with God and the power of His Spirit.

Divine healing is a gift from God, an act of His mercy and grace. Our part is to listen to Him and carry out His Word.

When I speak of listening to God's voice, I mean developing a practice of communion with the Father in which we are constantly asking, "Lord, what do You want me to do now? How do You want to use me? How should I pray? Whom do You want me to evangelize? Is there someone You want to heal?"

Sometimes the Holy Spirit gives me specific insights about people for whom I am praying. These come as impressions—specific words, pictures in my mind's eye, or physical sensations in my body that correspond to problems in their bodies.

These impressions help me know who and what to pray for as well as how to pray.

I do not imply that I have an infallible "hotline" to God, and that I always hear His voice and follow His leading. But I am open to God, listening to Him, confident that He wants to lead us to minister to others.

Learning how to heal is like learning how to walk on water. In both areas it is useful to know relevant biblical principles, to understand that Jesus is the Lord of all creation, and to

talk to others who have been successfully involved in the activity. It can even be helpful to compare notes on why various approaches succeed or fail. When the time comes “to get out of the boat,” however, all the best ideas and insights on “water walking” are of very little value.

The ability to successfully transcend the laws of nature is not discovered by mastering techniques or methodologies. When it comes to ministering in the power of the Holy Spirit, many people know why certain things can or should happen, but few people actually see them happen in their own experience.

The how of the healing ministry of Jesus is a mystery! And there are painfully few members of Christ’s body who are responding in obedience to Him by choosing to move into the realm of the miraculous. Remember, 11 of the disciples stayed in the boat; only Peter ventured out onto the water. As a result it was Peter alone who enjoyed the privilege of overcoming the laws of nature in response to the Lord’s call.

Jesus is still doing today what He was doing on the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee—calling common people to move above and beyond so-called natural laws and walk with Him in the realm of the miraculous. In the realm of the Spirit one thing is certain: Much more is unknown than is known! But our Lord is still calling us to follow Him.

Today we find that about half the world’s population has yet to hear the good news about Jesus. Therefore, the transference of Jesus’ healing ministry to others (the church) and the powerful exercise of it today are of utmost importance if we hope to see the kingdom of God reach the ends of the earth.

John Wimber was a founding leader of the Association of Vineyard Churches, which had its beginnings in Los Angeles and today has churches all across the world. He influenced the theology and practice of Vineyard churches from the early 1980s until his death in November 1997. Wimber is known for his emphasis on worship and for teaching and training the church to function in all the gifts of the Holy Spirit described in the Bible.