

What Pastors Don't Tell You About Running a Church

Bubba Justice, senior pastor at Inverness Vineyard Church in Birmingham, Alabama (), recently talked with Managing Editor Christine Johnson about his apprenticeship program, a practical training program that pastors can run in a church of any size. The two-year program allows churches to train ministers without having to form a school while also using those ministers as volunteers in all areas of operation. Volunteers are training in six systems: church finances, Sunday morning (weekend service) celebrations, small groups, connecting/assimilation, working with volunteers and evangelism/outreach. Training in each of the six systems lasts four months.

Johnson: Tell us about your congregation and how it started.

Justice: We were started in 1994 as a church plant out of the Birmingham Vineyard. Prior to that, I had been a volunteer pastor and did every single job in the church, so when it came time to be a pastor, I had experience in all the different arenas of the church. Our church has planted six different churches. Now we've got about 400-450 active people. On any given Sunday around 300 people attend, and we're heavily engaged in ministry to the poor and missions, church planting and evangelism.

Johnson: What kind of training did you undergo to prepare for the pastorate?

Justice: In 1983, I went to Bible college for one year, Southeastern Bible College in Birmingham. While I was in school, I really felt like I needed to have a little bit more life experience and practical experience to be a pastor in the church and felt like the Holy Spirit told me to go and get a

business degree. At the same time, I had been listening to Peter Wagner, and Peter Wagner had said the very best way for a person to be trained as a pastor would be to go spend 10 years at a local church and work in every department of the local church. So I did a dual thing in that I went and got an accounting degree—I'm a CPA—but simultaneously, I did everything that a paid pastor would do. I rotated through every ministry of the church but the worship team—and they wouldn't let me go on the worship team! ... Once I started pastoring this church, I went to seminary at Birmingham Theological Seminary in Birmingham. It was an extension center out of Jackson, Mississippi, so I went and got a master's degree in biblical studies.

Johnson: As a pastor, what burdens you, and what energizes you?

Justice: It energizes me to see people experience God's destiny for their lives. I was in a pastors' breakfast one time, and one of the pastors asked, "What do you want God to say to you on the Day of Judgment?" My response was, "I want God to say to me you helped every person in your church fulfill the destiny I have for them on their lives," so that's what really energizes me. Anytime we do something evangelistic, missions oriented or leadership, those all energize me. What drags me down is when people argue over unimportant issues or things that aren't essential for the kingdom of God. If someone gets upset because someone doesn't worship the way they do, that really drains me.

Johnson: Did you start the apprenticeship program, and how many churches are using it?

Justice: It's something that we started. In the Vineyard, instead of having one prescribed way of training church planters, there are four or five different churches that are advocating several different ways to train church planters. We have had interns from Fuller Seminary, and we've had two or

three interns from Beeson Divinity School, and I've had an intern from Princeton Seminary. What was important to me in talking to these interns and talking with other pastors who had internships was that there wasn't any structure to the internships necessarily. ... Even in my own experience as a volunteer pastor, anything that I picked up wasn't intentional on the part of the person who was mentoring me. I've done a lot of reading over the years, been exposed to a lot of people who talk about the structure of the church, and it basically boils down to ... most churches have some basic systems that you've got to have operational for the church to be successful. With my reading, in my seminary training and my year in Bible college, nowhere did they actually get into the practical, "How do you do this on a day-to-day basis of running a church?" Through prayer, through contemplation, and through study, I said I want to set up an apprenticeship program and, talking with several other pastors, determined that a person really could get the idea and learn and be familiar enough with something after four months of immersion into a specific area of the church.

Another thing that is really important to me about this is that a lot of pastors of churches of a medium size or smaller size feel as though they can't train other pastors or they can't have the ministry schools that the megachurches have. They get discouraged and they feel like they're disqualified from being able to engage in training leaders in the church. Going to the apprenticeship program—and we intentionally call it "apprenticeship" vs. "internship"—think through how a true apprenticeship works: If you were going to be an electrician or plumber where you come alongside a master electrician or a master plumber and you work with them, you do everything they do, and they supervise what you do. So it's not anything you do in theory. With true apprenticeships, you are working.

There are a lot of people who think they have a call of God on their life, and there's no way to test that call without going

to Bible college or seminary. What happens if at the end of that time frame if you discover you're not really called to be a pastor or a church planter or a staff person? You're really called to be a Christian businessperson. You just spent thousands of dollars and you've incurred a tremendous amount of debt. All of this came together as we thought through this apprenticeship program. ... Even if your church is 70 people, you can run an apprentice program with one person, and you could actually raise up a church planter or a pastor, and that's not something that smaller churches ever even think about that they can participate in.

Johnson: What are the specifics of the program setup?

Justice: The way I have set up the apprenticeship program is it's a two-year program, but I said, "I'm going to give you an exit ramp and an entry ramp every four months." ... Every four months, when it's time to rotate the apprenticeships, people could begin the apprenticeship, and they could go to the next one. For example, there was a lady who was having a baby, and she said, "I'm going to take this next rotation off and once my child is old enough, I'm going to come back in when I have some more time to do that." It's extremely flexible in four-month increments. This is the lay-driven version of the apprenticeship. When I'm working with a seminary, and they're getting credit for an internship or summer learning, then I will condense it. The way the apprenticeship is set up is that for a person who is a layperson and who's trying to test this out, it's about a 4- to 8-hour commitment (per week). ... When I get a full-time intern over a shorter period of time, I'm able to have him or her work on multiple systems simultaneously, whereas the average apprentice would only work on one system at a time.

Johnson: What do you foresee for the future of the program?

Justice: One of the visions God has given me is to raise up 200 pastors, church planters and full-time ministry workers

from right now until I turn 70, and that's 19 years. ... This apprenticeship program gives me a structured way to do that and a very doable way to do it because it engages people in what we're doing anyway in the life of the church. We're just intentionally making space for people who feel as though God's got a call on their life to come alongside. When they get through, if they feel like they need to go on and get further education and get that piece, that's great. If they already have that piece and this gives them the practical training, that's great too.

One of the other things that's been nice about this is that all pastors deal with people who say, "I feel like I have a call of God on my life" ... and when they've gone through this apprenticeship, they actually discover, "You know what? I'm really not called to full-time ministry as I thought I was." But it settles in their heart this question that's been out there: Am I called to full-time ministry? Am I not called to full-time ministry? And sometimes getting the answer now helps you to get on with the rest of your life and be fully engaged at the level God's called you to be fully engaged in.

My connecting pastor came through the apprenticeship program. So for churches that want to hire internally, this is a great program and a great structure to transition people, for example, from a business position into a church position.

Johnson: Where have you seen this program used?

Justice: I have taught this and have seen it used in other countries as well. I've seen it used in India; I've taught it in Kenya. It's not anything that's proprietary to the Vineyard or to me. It's something that we share and talk about. It's wide open for other people to be a part of, but it's just important to us that we're training people.

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the Birmingham Vineyard, where he served in a variety of roles as a volunteer pastor. He has been married to Melany Justice since 1987 and has two adult daughters who both work in Christian ministry. Bubba has a degree in accounting from University of Alabama Birmingham and a masters in Biblical studies from Birmingham Theological Seminary.