

STRONGER TOGETHER

Introduction:

Below are the various groups summaries of the discussions that took place around the suggested questions which were submitted after the topic *The Trellis and the Vine*. These follow up discussions in small several groups proved to be very beneficial to explore the concept of the *Trellis and the Vine* as a picture of leaders (the trellis) and the congregation (the vine).

The most important Trellis and Vine is the relationship between Christ and His Church. As the Head of the Church the Lord leads, upholds, guides, supports the growth of His worldwide Kingdom. Every relationship or group has in essence a trellis and a vine. In marriage, the husband is the trellis while the wife is vine. In the family, the parents are the trellis which the children are the vine. In a school, the boards and management are the trellis while the student body is the vine. Among the students, the student council is the trellis and the fellow students the vine. This powerful analogy has various applications and we discussed those through in our small groups.

Thanks to all the groups in supplying your summary notes. Some groups did not have the time or opportunity to discuss all questions. As you read to submitted answers of each group, it is noticeable that each group looked at the questions from various angles. This is so enriching as we can learn from each other. The proposal is that our first *Stronger Together* will be a follow-up of this topic, again, due to the traffic light system, in small groups, either the same or a different mixture.

If any of you who weren't able to attend the first times desire to join us, we welcome you. The more of us who get on board to think and share, the stronger will be. The wisdom of God is that in the 'multitude of counsellors is wisdom.' So, you are encouraged to come and share your wisdom with others so that we all can profit together.

Below are the discussion questions which were submitted by the various individuals. Not all questions were discussed and that is one reason why spending another evening on these questions and the shared notes would be useful.

The submitted discussion questions with the summary answers of the various groups

1. What are our congregation's strengths and weaknesses?
 - a. Strengths:
 - *Because we are small, we know everyone*
 - *We are a church of families*
 - *Our caring and sacrificial love*
 - *Care about each other*
 - *Support network*
 - *Familiarity with each other*
 - *Prayer is offered for individuals if so desired*
 - *Young families*
 - *Good singing*
 - *Committed attendance by our members*
 - *Seriousness about serving the Lord*
 - *Leadership focussed on leading and attentive in listening and united*
 - *Focus on the youth*
 - *Well organized though too much can be too rigid*
 - *Good solid teaching and strong doctrinal foundation like KJV, 5 Sola's etc.*

- *Balanced preaching between Law and Gospel*
- *Lively preaching of the Word each Sunday*
- *Rich variety of background, education, viewpoints while we still can be united and accept each other's differences*
- *Sit together as families*
- *Many youth*
- *Strong and health marriages*
- *Good leaders*
- *Different abilities and roles in life*
- *Have a Christian school connected to church and family*

b. Weaknesses:

- *We are in some sense too big to know everyone on a deeper level*
- *We are limited in the range of cultural backgrounds or cultural influences*
- *We can feel too comfortable in our little groups*
- *Too much reliance on the leaders to choose our direction*
- *Long-term care for needy individuals or families*
- *Getting too busy with your own things and so forget others*
- *Too formal*
- *Idolizing of the pastor*
- *We stick to what is comfortable for us even though it may be ineffective*
- *People fall through the cracks and are not noticed enough*
- *Rather closed about what's really happening in our hearts or lives*
- *Isolation from other like-minded churches; being a single church of our 'kind' in NZ*
- *Cliques after church (standing always talking with the same people)*
- *Sensitive to 'visitors' who are not used to our forms and orders*
- *Why we believe what we believe but also what we believe in distinction to other churches*
- *The Dutch roots which for most of the younger generations is shallow, misunderstood, and irrelevant as they grow up and live in NZ culture.*
- *More recent immigrant families with younger children who have no close relatives and therefore cannot rely on grandparents, aunties and uncles for their childcare*
- *Too big to feel connected to the whole church family.*
- *Lack of forum – advice – encouragement for younger parents (mums) to walk with them in those first years of parenting.*

2. How can we see our differences as strengths rather than something that keeps us separated or divided from others?

- *Grace is necessary to deal well with all our differences. Yet differences balance us and sharpen us to think about what we believe. We are to hear each other out.*
- *As individuals, we need to understand that we all think differently about things, and have open communication, and be non-judgmental.*
- *For our church as a whole, we need to be more open towards other churches' differences. We can be traditionalists. This does not mean that there is a right way or a wrong way, but maybe we could be more open to learning why other churches do things differently.*
- *Our church can come across as not being very welcoming, and we do not tend to draw people from different cultures other than our own. Does that mean we are doing things wrong? Not necessarily. Our traditions are different but not wrong in themselves.*

- *We can come across as 'cold' to visitors who have never experienced our church services.*
- *We can be very hesitant to invite people to our church, because we are so different than the average Kiwi church.*
- *We need more than open doors to draw people in. We need individuals to do this one on one.*
- *We need to lose that 'shame' or preconception we have in what other people may think or experience with the 'cultural shock' when they come in our church doors. God can bless their experience.*

3. What do you suggest could we do together about weaknesses? How can we better use our strengths?

a. Dealing with our weaknesses

- *Develop leadership qualities in younger people*
- *Emphasize in discussions and home visits*
- *Break church into smaller 'districts' in which members commit to look out for each other in the group to avoid others 'falling through the cracks'*
- *Ask more than 'How are you?' and then moving on*
- *Support others with humility for we can learn much from others, young and old, even if they need support*
- *To get others on a deeper level: challenge ourselves to invite different people over – this would be using our strength as families.*
- *Make a prayer list each week with different members and talk to them to know what to pray for (something which is already done in our smaller Bible study groups)*
- *Be aware that cultural backgrounds make people do things differently which may be unusual to us but not wrong Biblically. Make a point to visit other churches while on holidays with open mind.*

b. Using our strengths

- *Channel our resources in reaching outside of our circles with acts of love, service, charity*

4. Where does the Scripture (or our doctrines) fit in the analogy of the trellis and the vine? Is the Scripture part of the roots, the trellis, the vine? Or is the Scripture the pruning, sunlight and fertilizer?

- *Scripture is such an integral part of all areas of church life. Allow the Scripture to prune and grow us individually and together in our various groups, like Bible Study.*

5. If God would guide us to start a new church elsewhere in New Zealand, what are some of the things we would or would not do? What do we identify ourselves with?

- A church planting would need to be very closely connected to our current church and physically close enough to be able to have a minister and members visiting regularly. The school situation would also need to be considered. Do we stay close enough that the children can go to the same school, or would we be able to set up a new school straight away? The strength for the new church would come from our current church.

What do we identify with? We would need to hold onto our Reformed identity and all the doctrines, teachings, and beliefs that come with that. We may however expect to see a cultural shift.

- *Traditions can be good, but not inflexibility with traditions if they no longer serve the purpose well or don't fit the cultural context.*
 - *Our identity is the Word of God*
 - *An atmosphere of respect and reverence is important. Though different people will have diverse ways of showing this, the attitude of respect remains central.*
 - *Some liturgy changes would be wise:*
 - *leaders pray together in consistory room but then enter sanctuary individually to sit with their families rather than file in the beginning of the service.*
 - *quiet greeting and chatting before the service begins should be allowed. Not to the point of disrespectful atmosphere but avoiding a stony silence which no one dares to break, even if a visitor sits besides us. Begin with small steps, saying hello to visitors instead of sittings silent.*
 - *After service, instead of filing out in stony silence, perhaps sit down and say hello to your fellow worshippers.*
 - *We thought it may be good to strengthen bonds with likeminded churches we already do things with. For example, the Taranaki church and their bible camp and the Palmerston North Church where Pastor preaches.*
 - *The things we would change would be the connection with the Dutch background. Although we do need accountability between churches.*
 - *We thought it may be possible to join small churches with a young family, to bring in new blood and energy. We talked about leadership that it is important to have a few do this and not just one person as it may lead to problems being swept under the carpet.*
6. In which way do you think our church Trellis does/does not meet the needs of the vine. What, if needed, can be improved?
- *Ways that our needs are met: We are well fed spiritually and have an approachable session.*
 - *Things that could be improved: We lack deeper connection. Do we really understand each other's needs?*
 - *All our leaders, in any position across our trellis, need to understand the purpose of each position or event, and grow into achieving that purpose.*
 - *We possibly need more connection with our session, how could we improve on this?*
7. How much energy is spent on running programs and organizing events, and how much energy is spent on developing people? Is this correctly balanced?

- *By building relationships, you are building people. Use organized events as opportunities to build relationships.*
- *Are we developing people to grow into their role or potential future roles?*
- *Training is needed in how to balance roles with work and family life.*
- *How do we get the right people into the right roles?*

8. How well does this statement describe our church, "Our leaders organize and run all church activities?"

- We have many people putting up their hands for many activities
- Small groups are currently doing things together without consistency in part (i.e. work done at the "Village" of the Carterton Baptist Church)

9. Is there a particular category people in our congregation that is 'forgotten'?

- *There may be some people that seem to 'exclude themselves' for various reasons. It is important to continue to reach out to these people*
- *Who are our lonely people? Are our elderly forgotten?*
- *Anyone who lives on their own, may easily be forgotten*
- *Members who just left youth group (especially if they are still single), single middle-aged, those who are alone in their age group.*
- *Use personal invitations if organising something for them, not just a notice in the tidbits.*

10. If the trellis supports the vine, then the trellis is the Lord as He is the source and strength of His people. So how do we understand that in a church the trellis is the church leaders/consistory?

11. What are the main purposes of a trellis in relationship to the vine? And how does that apply to our church family?

12. Is only the consistory having a task here? If that is not who else and how must we bring this work into practice?

- *All of us can be tools in God's hand. We are called to be great, as reflection of God's greatness. We are all called to tasks in God's kingdom. God grows and equips us for greater and greater tasks.*

13. We need a gospel community that is pro-active. What are examples of this in our current setting?

- *Proactive- means anticipating problems and have something in place. It also means growing people.*
- *We need to be less isolated as a church, perhaps connecting at some level with other churches and talk to them about problems they have faced, and we could face one day.*

- *We need to be asking ourselves, what is my role?*
- *We need to be teaching our children and our members to live a life of serving and being Christ-like. We need to have a giving heart; this is a proactive way of growth.*

- *Instead of waiting to be given a task, look for a task.*
- *Reach out even when there isn't a "crisis".*
- *Prayer points in weekly tidbits – cycle through the church family and ask them beforehand if they have any specific prayer requests.*
- *Even in casual conversations with others, ask them what you can pray for them.*

14. Thinking about the trellis. The trellis is made up out of lots of posts. It is good to put one vine to one trellis post. So, are we to focus on one person, a group or on the whole church?

15. As was mentioned, the danger of apostasy is only one generation away. How do we prevent apostasy from creeping in?

- *We thought it started with the individual families, so discussed ways to strengthen these. One of the discussions we had was about family worship times and how to actually do this constructively. Maybe we can organize an evening where older ones share the ideas for young married couples so they have some examples. Some were about big families to focus on all age groups, to read children's Bible at dinner time and have a Bible history book at 9pm for older children, with discussions around these.*
- *Encouraging children's questions and taking time to think about things together.*
- *Encouraging youth group and activities in the church like prayer and bible studies.*
- *Prayer to keep us close to God's Word, not defining it by ourselves but going back to the doctrines.*

16. In what ways is a church supposed to stay the same, and in what ways is a church supposed to change (grow)?

- *A church should never change in their Biblical and doctrinal convictions (as summed up in our Confessions and Creeds, called our "Three Forms of Unity.")*
- *Changes must only be made if they further the kingdom of God and are honorable to God's glory. Traditions are not necessarily bad if they preserve and no need to change unless they hinder effective relationships with others.*

17. What does to be proactive instead of reactive mean practically?

18. How do we encourage growth in our "communion of saints?"

- *Open minds, sharing, being vulnerable, encourage others to join in with these sorts of discussions.*

