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Q&A w/ Rev. Todd Lovell

Pastor at The Vine of Northwest Arkansas

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What is the mission of The Vine of NWA?

The mission of The Vine of NWA is “to live lives of holy purpose by loving God, loving others, and making disciples of Jesus Christ.” This mission has gone through several iterations and is continually being refined as I meet new people in Centerton and get a sense of the surrounding communities.

The one thing that has always been consistent in my community conversations is that people are desperate for an ultimate purpose for their lives. By “ultimate purpose” I mean something beyond simply earning that next promotion or acquiring more stuff. I find that

too many people – even successful people – spend their entire lives working for the weekend.

Deep down, every person wants their life to matter in some way, and we believe that the ultimate purpose is found in the holy calling that God gives us to love Him, love others, and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We want to be the kind of people that not only live lives of holy purpose, but also awaken that holy purpose in others.

How has your work at The Vine changed in light of the pandemic?

I've been studying the church planting world for almost 10 years now. When I heard I would be appointed to The Vine, my research intensified. I ordered the latest church-planting books and dusted off my old ones. And then the COVID-19 pandemic hit. To my dismay, none of the church-planting books I owned had a "Global Pandemic" chapter. Believe me. I looked.

What does it look like to meet new people and establish new gatherings when you are unable to meet new people and establish new gatherings? That's a question that continues to keep me up at night. And right now there doesn't seem to be a clear answer. There are no global pandemic church planting gurus to look to, though I'm sure that book is being written somewhere right now.

Perhaps the biggest shift I've had to make in my work at The Vine is to really adjust my perception of the timeline for starting a church. I come from a background of working in established churches where it was possible to conceive of, recruit for, and plan an entire event or ministry in six weeks. In church planting, the timeline is much, much slower. Add a worldwide pandemic and it's prolonged even more. I've had to continually remind myself that even small progress is progress, and as long as we're making progress, we're going to be okay. Patience and Perseverance. That's what will get us through this.

What are some unique ways you've had to think outside the box this year?

I'm learning that church planting is less about pushing open closed doors of opportunity and more about walking through the doors of opportunity that are already opened. Attempts to push open closed doors rarely works in my experience. People are often uninterested, unwilling, or unavailable.

Therefore, I've tried to pay increasingly close attention to those doors of opportunity that are already opened to me by the Holy Spirit, and do my best to take full advantage of them. For example, we host a youth football organization on our fields for practice during the week. I attended their practices at least once a week and served as the team's chaplain. While at these practices, I met several new people who provided me with new opportunities. One person asked if I would come and share our vision for The Vine at a local business leader online meeting. I accepted the opportunity, and through that

meeting, had five other business leaders who reached out to have conversations with me about The Vine.

Those kinds of opportunities are invaluable, and would never have happened if I stayed in my living room wondering who I should cold call next. Instead, I'm learning to spend as much intentional time in the community as I can, and respond to opportunities as the Holy Spirit opens doors.

Admittedly, this may not seem like "out of the box" ministry to some. In fact, it might seem incredibly obvious to most. But for whatever reason, it wasn't to me when I started. In my training and experience, ministry had always been much more targeted. But the practice of church planting is teaching me that ministry is about being intentionally present in your community and being open to every opportunity that comes your way.



Rev. Lovell's "office" for The Vine of NWA. Like many other pastors, Lovell has had to shift services to online only. The difference is that, The Vine has functioned as an online church, without a true worship space, from the beginning.



Rev. Lovell's records lots of videos for The Vine's social media page and for Bible studies.

What has been the hardest barrier to overcome this year, in regards to the work of the church?

If you ask most new church planters what their hardest barrier is I imagine most would say that it's meeting new people. Simply put, new churches form by finding new people. That means that if you can't find new people, you'll never form new churches. Centerton is already a difficult setting for meeting new people because it lacks a city center. There is no coffee shop or diner or local meet-up spot where people gather on a regular basis.

Layer the COVID-19 pandemic on top of that and the difficulty goes through the roof. So I've tried to do the best I can with social media. It's definitely not the same as meeting people in person, but it's the best tool we have right now for meeting new people. Social media for churches can be a difficult thing to do well, even in a pandemic-free world. But with the pandemic and the resulting onset of increased screen fatigue, it can be almost impossible to connect with new people in meaningful ways.

That said, I also believe that one of the greatest traits of any church planter is the ability to be relentlessly (and perhaps annoyingly) optimistic in the face of difficulty. So while the pandemic has made certain aspects of church planting more difficult, I suppose there are some advantages. First, there is no institutional memory at The Vine. We do not have

leaders and lay people longing to return to “the way things were before.” Second, we are a small group of people so it is much easier for us to pivot when we need to. And third, we currently do not have a building that is ready for use. The building on our property will be renovated to bring it up to code and make it functional for community gatherings. But this is still months away. Therefore, there is no pressure for us to be meeting in person in our building.

What does the future of The Vine look like?

Our vision for The Vine is “to be a vibrant church at the center of community life, calling all people into relationship with Jesus Christ.” I believe we have an opportunity at The Vine to reclaim the church’s rightful place at the center of community life. For generations, the local church lived at the center of community life by hosting community events, meeting community needs, and encouraging community piety. Somewhere along the way the church lost (or forfeited) this vital role. The Vine wants to reclaim it once again by engaging our community in creative ways.

We hope to do this by embodying our three core values. At The Vine, we want to be community-minded, Gospel-centered, and Spirit-driven.

Being community-minded means that we are less concerned about getting the community into our building and more concerned about building our community. We are intentionally stewarding our property to benefit the community of Centerton in powerful ways. We are currently developing 45 acres at the northeast corner of Centerton. This development will increase the vitality of our community and become a hub of activity for generations to come.

Being Gospel-centered means that we are unapologetic about the great love God has for us in Jesus Christ. We serve and love those around us because God first loved us. We seek to live according to the greatest commandment given by our Lord Jesus: “Love the Lord your God with your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37).

Being Spirit-driven means that we are passionate about life transformation. We believe that it is the truth of the Gospel that sets us free but it is the power of God’s Holy Spirit that transforms people into the image of Jesus. We seek to live according to the great commission given by our Lord Jesus: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19).

Who is someone that inspires you in your daily life and why?

I am inspired every day by the spiritual resilience of my children. My wife and I have a 9-year-old daughter, a 5-year-old son, and a 3-year-old son. When they first heard of my appointment to The Vine, they were all excited about our new adventure. Over the past months, I have found wonderful notes from my daughter encouraging me to never give up and reminding me that I’m a good pastor. I’ve seen my boys’ excitement when we get to go

to “daddy’s new church” and play in the gym. But over the past several weeks, when things get quiet in the house, one of my kids will come up to me and ask, “Daddy, can we go to church on Sunday?”

As the pandemic drags on and the church planting work moves slower than expected, I can tell that my kids are longing for a faith community to call their own. This appointment has been unlike others where we simply transition our kids from one faith community to the next. With this appointment, there isn’t yet a faith community that exists to meet their spiritual longing. And that’s what inspires me to do the work I’m doing. Their longing reminds me that I can’t quit. I can’t let up. I can’t slow down. Because I’m not only planting a church that the families of Centerton will want to be a part of, I’m also planting a church that my family will want to be a part of for years to come.

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