

A Report on the Vine Conference 2002

by Eric Stanford

What would happen if a generation of believers gathered together for one simple purpose: to build relationships now that will transform the future of the church and the culture?

That's the open-ended query that takes the place of a mission statement for the Vine conferences, held at least once a year for four years now. As I attended the most recent Vine, August 30–September 2 in Orlando, I can now give a provisional answer. They would talk a lot, eat well, talk some more, and worship quite profoundly. Did I mention talk? The long-term fusions of heart and purpose that may or may not come out of networking at the conference are left for time to tell.

More and more, it seems, there are getting to be face-to-face meetings of people who identify themselves with the postmodern Christian movement. (If the term “postmodern” hasn't gone out. If it's fair to describe it as a “movement.”) There's [Soularize](#) by the Ooze people. Terra Nova puts on the occasional [event](#). And of course Emergent Village sponsors a bunch of get-togethers, including its big [convention](#). I thought I would describe the special character of the [Vine](#) as I see it, my reader, since sometime or other you or someone you know may want to go.

The Vine conference is an initiative of the Regeneration Forum—the same small coterie who are behind *re:generation quarterly*. If you know that rather heady Christian [magazine](#) for young adults (financially struggling of late), you'd recognize some of the flavor of the Vine. Affirmative of ecumenism, gender equality, and ethnic diversity. Taking seriously the arts and entertainment. Oriented toward universities, government, and other institutions. More issues-focused than church-focused. Wordy, witty (in two senses), blunt.

The lowercase “generation” in the title of *re:generation quarterly* once stood for Generation X, before it became unfashionable to try to define generations and preferable to use vague euphemisms like “emerging generation” and “emerging culture.” Nevertheless, the age boundaries of the majority of conference attendees conformed closely to those of the people who would today make up Generation X if there were a Generation X, namely, early 20s to early 40s.

The crowd of ex-Xers at the Vine I attended was not large, a hundred or so. But it was interesting and even impressive. To give you a sense of who showed up, they included an attorney with the U.S. Department of Education, a professor of literature at an evangelical college, a staff member with Habitat for Humanity, a graduate student in philosophy at the Catholic University of America, and a policy analyst for a women's law center. They also included ordinary people like this scribe.

What impressed me most about the group was how few ego bubbles I bumped into. The people I met were almost universally kind and conversable. You can learn something from a person, you can connect, when humans are humans like that. I was pleased as well as impressed.

This fall's Vine talks were loosely clumped around the phrase “the life that is really life” from 1 Timothy 6:19. But that phrase wasn't really a theme. The conference didn't have a theme, no central subject. And that was so for a very important reason: the participants in the conference bring their own concerns to it, and they are a diverse lot. Let me explain.

There are no big-name or professional speakers at the Vine conferences. If you come, you speak. Each participant is expected to give at least one five-minute talk on a workshop panel and answer questions. A small number of participants are picked to give longer addresses at plenary sessions. So if your fascination is with evangelical-Orthodox dialogue, let's say, or youth ministry in the inner city, then that's what you'll talk about. Here are some actual panel-talk titles:

“National Security That Doesn't Eliminate Freedom”

“Amidst Scandals and an Ailing Pope—Inward Reflections for the Catholic Church”

“What Films Are Prophesying about the Future”
“Charter Schools’ Dismal Report—Are They Still Worth Starting?”
“Eco-Missiology”

Let me point out that many of the presentations turned out to be far less high-falutin’ than their titles might have led one to expect.

As for the attitudes among participants toward the presentation requirement, I would say most fell either into the category of near terror or the category of unbridled glee, depending on whether the individual enjoys public speaking. However, I can also say that many in the near-terror camp (there was I) commented with relief after their bit, “That wasn’t so bad.” The workshop auditors were at other times speakers themselves, so they were inclined to be appreciative and forgiving. I wonder if some who are trying to make up their minds about going to the Vine plump for no when they learn they will have to speak. If so, I would say to them: Don’t worry about it; just go.

While the every-participant-a-speaker requirement lent a lumpy diversity to the conference, it also made the Vine something special for me. And I’m not talking about the new ideas I encountered (though one can’t help learning when hanging around so much well-lubricated gray matter). I’m talking about the privilege it was to get to hear people’s stories, take a peek at their passions. Some of the less educated and credentialed people were more interesting in this respect.

Where else than the Vine would I have met a young man who left the Roman Catholic Church in disgust, now teaches Sunday school in a Christian Reformed church, and is anguishing because he thinks he may be called to the Roman Catholic priesthood?

Where else would I have met a jazz pianist, popular in clubs, who until recently was a music minister for an Episcopalian church in New York City and is now writing music for a jazz hymnal being prepared by a Presbyterian church in Pennsylvania?

Where else would I have met a young woman from the Bahamas who lost her marketing job in an economic downturn and who, at 30, is still struggling to choose a course in life and establish herself independent of the powerful presence of her pastor father?

The conference offered the usual sorts of opportunities to get together and talk: small groups, meals, free time. But it was in worship that true oneness was most nearly achieved. Perhaps no one felt entirely at home in the mélange of prayer-book prayers, praise choruses, hymns, chants, and choral readings, but no one felt entirely alienated either. The most moving time of the whole conference, for me, was the capstone Taizé service, a sort of soul pause of song and candle flicker.

Some attempt was made by the conference organizers to nudge attendees into identifying an action step or initiative they would take as a result of what they experienced. From what I heard, few at the conference were ready to embark on any new life-changing course. But the fruit that the Vine may yet bear will be in people, not policy, anyway. As we Vineys, reflect on what we saw in each other, and perhaps maintain one or two new friendships with people we met, we’ll change a bit ourselves, and change church and culture indirectly, as the Spirit acts in the interaction.

Maybe that’s what these f2f events are best at. I’m for them.

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