

# Beginning a Revolution

## Understanding the Principles of Transformation

Imagine the possibilities of what can happen when God begins to transform a community. It is infinite what God can do when His people are both individually and corporately devoted to following Him. For me, the endless possibilities started with a deflated helium balloon.

In the early spring of 1987, Michael Anderson was 12 years old. He stood on the front lawn of his church in Ontario, Oregon, holding a yellow, helium-filled balloon prepared earlier that morning in his Sunday School class. Inside the balloon, he had inserted a scrap of notebook paper with the handwritten words, “Let us love one another – 1 John 4:7 & 8.” He released his balloon along with the rest of the class. It slowly rose into the cold morning air, drifting eastward with the prevailing wind toward the Idaho border.

A little over a year later in the summer of 1988, the last thing on my mind was planting a church in Idaho. My wife, Nancy, and

I were happily situated in a growing Vineyard church in Southern California. We felt secure and fulfilled in our ministry as associate pastors at the Desert Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Lancaster, California.

Nancy and I fell in love 20 years earlier when we met as students at the College of Idaho (now Albertson College) in Caldwell, Idaho. We married in 1970 and remained in Caldwell as newlyweds for two more years before moving to the mountains of California to raise our children on my family’s ranch. I went to work as a schoolteacher for several years before joining the church staff in Lancaster.

In 1988, we received a phone call from an old Idaho friend. Pat Armstrong, who had remained close with Nancy and me since our college days, made his living building backcountry trails with a team of mules. We had often spent several of our summer breaks working for Pat while I was still teaching school.

At the time I received Pat’s phone call, we hadn’t worked for him in several years due to our responsibilities at the church. However, he called to ask for help on a project to reconstruct a damaged airstrip on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. With a couple of weeks of vacation, we jumped at the opportunity and headed 800 miles north to Idaho. Our kids, Kate and Brooke, had heard many stories about our early days in Idaho but had never visited the state themselves. We were all content with our lifestyle

on the family ranch. None of us had even considered leaving our comfortable California lifestyle – that is, until we passed through Boise on our way to meet Pat.

Vision never announces its coming, but when it comes, you know it. And before I knew it, vision was on my front porch, knocking loudly on the door.

I can’t explain what happened that day, but I believe it was supernatural – our whole family fell in love with the city. God was definitely doing something in all of our hearts, but I was the last to admit it. Privately, Nancy asked me if I would ever consider giving up our life in California to plant a Vineyard church in Boise. Suddenly, fear began to stir in me because I had witnessed so many church plant failures. Without much thought, I defiantly answered, “No!” And I informed her that I didn’t want to talk about it again.

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Two days later, we flew into Pat’s camp on Mahoney Creek. Everyone was enjoying the time in the wilderness, except me. I was miserable. For many years, I had waited to get back to the mountains of Idaho, but I was not enjoying it. The thought of leaving the security of my established life really bothered me.

Leaving the ranch, risking everything, transplanting our family to an unknown place with no friends – it all seemed totally crazy and impractical.

Noticing my struggle, Nancy suggested that I take a long walk and get alone with God. Because of my attitude, I perceived her as really saying, “Why don’t you take a hike?” Climbing a tall mountain adjacent to Mahoney Creek, I only stopped to catch my breath and pray. At one point, I remember crying out to God for an answer.

“Lord,” I said, “I desperately need a word from you.” But every time I stopped hiking, I never heard His voice. Then I figured God would speak to me once I made it to the summit, just as He spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai. But His voice was absolutely quiet. Finally, I decided to stop guessing how God would speak to me and just enjoy the time I had in the backcountry with my family and friends.

As I began walking down an aspen-covered ridge, something caught my eye on the opposite side of the ravine. The bright yellow object looked out of place for the colors on the mountain terrain. Intrigued by this object, I ventured closer to see what it was.

I descended the ravine and scrambled up the opposite side. After climbing under a thorny berry bush, I emerged carrying Michael Anderson’s deflated yellow balloon with an illustration of Noah’s ark printed on the side. I sensed this particular balloon

had been sent to me from the Lord and that it contained a message in it from Him. I felt the balloon and there was a small note inside. At first, I was almost afraid to remove it. I climbed back up the side of the ravine to a bright sunny spot and sat down. I ripped a small hole on the side of the balloon to remove the paper.

Here I was, sitting on a mountainside in the very center of the largest wilderness area in the continental United States. I had prayed all day for a word from God. As you can guess, the note read, “Let us love one another – 1 John 4:7 & 8.” Oddly enough, at the time I remember telling the Lord that I needed a real word, a more specific answer to my question.

It was then that the Lord spoke to me through the Holy Spirit more clearly than I had ever heard Him before. He said, “Tri, I don’t care where you do it. All I want you to do is build a church that loves people.” Then He asked me, “Do you want to do it in Boise, Idaho?” It was at that moment that I discovered what He had already put in my heart. Without hesitating, I replied, “Yes, Lord, I do.”

Later that morning, I wandered back into our camp at Mahoney Creek and found Nancy by the fire. She asked me if I had heard anything from the Lord. I pulled the balloon and small strip of notebook paper from my pocket, telling her that God had written me a note.

## Confirmation to Continue

For someone who has been with Tri Robinson in all of his ministry endeavors, his wife Nancy has some stories to tell. But in all of their adventurous decisions, she knows that in each instance God was leading.

"What has been so reassuring to Tri and me all these years is that we knew that moving to Boise was God's idea; it certainly wasn't ours," Nancy said. "As we began moving into this process, we sensed that God was doing something. I even saw it in our children."

When she suggested he go pray about what God was doing in his heart while they were out in the Idaho wilderness, Nancy suspected God was stirring Tri's heart.

"I have been around Tri enough to know that when the Lord is giving him new vision, Tri needs time to hear from the Lord and work it out with Him," Nancy said. "When I told Tri that he needed to go figure out what the Lord was doing, he came home and shared how the Lord had spoken to him. I was really blessed and amazed at what God was doing."

The Lord continued confirming to the Robinsons His emerging plan for them to plant a church in Boise.

"God gave us a lot to stand on," Nancy recalled. "He spoke to our hearts many other times. The next winter after the Idaho trip, our family piled into our old 1951 Dodge pickup. We were driving home from a Christmas party at our neighbor's ranch and we had the radio on, singing along with the Christmas carols. Between our ranches, our old pickup truck picked up this station crystal clear, which was a miracle in itself because the pickup had trouble tuning in anything. Then we heard 'Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from Treasure Valley in Boise, Idaho.' We were picking up a KBOI broadcast from Boise over 800 miles away. That was just more confirmation for our family.

"We needed to know that beyond a shadow of a doubt this was the Lord's ideal. Situations came up that really tested us and stretched us, but we never doubted that moving out in faith was what God wanted us to do."

What God was giving me was a vision I couldn't accomplish on my own or even with just my family. I needed several others to journey with me and make this vision from God a reality in the city of Boise. It was almost one year to the day from finding the balloon that we found ourselves back in Boise with 13 other families from the Lancaster church. They, too, felt God's call to go plant a church in Boise that would love people. This team of people would have not been able to fulfill this vision had they gone out alone. But together, we were a collection of believers who trusted that God was going to help us accomplish the purpose He had set before us.

Today, Michael Anderson's balloon is framed on my office wall. I often look at that note and remember God's faithfulness and His very clear commission for us to build a church where people love one another.

On a recent autumn day I had a moment of nostalgia that filled my heart with gratitude. Like many pastors, I often get so focused on the daily responsibilities of running a church that I forget to reflect on the miracles that God has done.

It was a Wednesday and I had just been to the Barnabas Center, our benevolence and outreach facility on our campus. I considered everything I had just observed, ministry and activity in every corner of the facility. I was aware that even though it was mid-morning on a weekday, the food pantry had many volunteers

serving and distributing food to numerous needy families. In an adjoining area medical volunteers were working in our free clinic that provided medical assistance to people who couldn't afford it. In the hallway interpreters were interacting with Spanish-speaking clients. There was a team using a fork lift, unloading and moving pallets of food that not only supplied our warehouse but over 25 other food pantries in the community as well. In an adjacent classroom, there were 26 young people being instructed and trained to be missionaries. They would soon be deployed as medics and midwives in poverty-stricken communities. Behind the Barnabas Center, other people were harvesting vegetables in a large garden that supplied the food pantry with fresh produce for the poor.

As I walked back to my office from the Barnabas Center, I paused for a moment on a grass embankment that borders our athletic fields. I took advantage of this vantage point for a quick look around. From my viewpoint, I observed how our elementary school teachers lovingly interacted with their students as they participated in an outside activity. I then turned to look at our main facility – a system of buildings that houses numerous groups every week as well as multiple services on Sundays.

Centered between the children's wing and the administration/adult education wing is a large sanctuary, a youth chapel and a big lobby we lovingly refer to as "Heritage Hall." Heritage Hall is what you might call the living room of the church. It was

designed with the idea that church would be an all-week event. The main purpose of the hall is a warm, welcoming place for anyone who wants to hang out. It has a beautiful fireplace, flanked by leather couches and chairs, a coffee bar, a bookstore, and bistro tables complete with plug-ins for computers and Internet access. Often, someone is softly playing the baby grand piano sitting in the corner.

Standing there, viewing this place called Vineyard Boise, it struck me what God can do with a group of people committed to a life of discipleship. I became overwhelmed as I thought about all those who flow through this place on a weekly basis, people who faithfully work in so many areas to bring healing to the broken and hurting, the hundreds of people it takes to lead discipleship groups, children's ministries, youth programs and Bible studies. I thought of those who usher and greet as well as those who serve in the coffee bar week after week. It is truly a busy place.

As I pondered all of this, it struck me how much had happened since that day, many years ago, when I stood on a mountainside in the Idaho wilderness clutching a small yellow balloon. Finding this balloon inspired a clear vision to go build a church that would love people in the name of Jesus. I believe the greatest miracle isn't the size of Vineyard Boise or even the amount of ministry that pours out of it. Instead, it is the miraculous way that God has gathered so many to one place who have captured His

heart and desire to be used by Him. Somehow, Vineyard Boise had become a 22-acre campus that facilitates literally hundreds of volunteers who were dedicated to the vision of building a church that would “love people.” Only God could have done such a thing.

As I stood there, I realized what an incredible testimony this church is to the power of a God-given vision, a vision that had miraculously become reality in our life at Vineyard Boise.

Throughout this book, we’re going to hear some of the real-life stories of people serving in our church who have experienced this radical transformation first-hand. But churches that change lives don’t just happen overnight. You can’t plant a church and hope to see it grow to a thousand members in a year. Not only is that extremely unlikely, it’s also dangerous. Without the proper structure in place, a church can become little more than a popular place to visit on Sundays.

Every church leader wants to see his church or ministry grow, not because they desire to have a big ministry, but because they want to impact more lives for the Kingdom of God. Our discussion throughout this book about vision, culture, and structure will help equip you to develop the momentum you need to fulfill the vision God has placed on your heart. I trust these words will not be just another book full of ideas but practical advice that will change the way you lead in ministry.