

The Call to Change

Rich Nathan

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The Challenge of Change

Hebrews 11:8-9

Happy New Year! The word that keeps rolling around in my head as I think about this year, 2019, is the word “risk”. I’ve been thinking a lot about risks and risk-taking recently. John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard movement, who became a spiritual father to me was fond of saying:

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Photo of John Wimber next to this quote:

“Faith is spelled R-I-S-K.”

We Americans like to think of ourselves as risk-takers. The people who wanted to play it safe stayed in the Old Country. It was risk-takers who left their homes and villages, left their families and ventured across the ocean, trusting their lives to a very uncertain fate. It’s risk-takers today who emigrate to the United States. Those who want to play it safe stay at home.

It was the risk-takers who filled Independence Hall in Philadelphia in 1776 to declare independence and to declare war on the most powerful nation in the world at the time. It was risk-takers who pushed away from their homes and villages on the east coast and ventured west. It was the risk-takers who invented the machines and started the businesses and cleared the land that provided for them when they got to Ohio to the Great Plains and West. America historically has been a nation of people who say “So what if it’s never been done before, let’s try it!” We have sayings in America like “No risk, no reward.”

But now we’ve become a nation of risk-averse people. This is especially true in the philosophy of child-raising that we’ve adopted here in America over the last 30 years. You’ve probably heard of helicopter parents who constantly hover over their kids to make sure they are always safe.

A helicopter parent confessed that before she allowed her kids to play outside, they’d go through a 20 minute safety routine of sunscreen, sun hats, locking the gates to the fenced back yard, and then putting out three reflective cones in their cul-de-sac reminding people to drive slowly in case her kids figured out how to open the gate.

You say, “That’s not me.” Would any of you parents admit that you’re the kind of person who hovered over your child, trying to ensure that they be kept safe from any kind of pain, any kind of stress?

You might be a helicopter parent if:

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- You stay up until 11:00pm rewriting your child’s English essay because you knew they could have done a better job if they weren’t so tired.
- You have a bad back from stooping down and running after your toddler’s every step so they don’t fall.
- When your child is disciplined at school or gets an assignment in late, you negotiate with the teacher to make an exception for your child.
- Your 8-year old still has the training wheels on his bike. Not that you let him ride it that often. The sidewalk is dangerous and they go too fast for you to keep up!

These are real confessions from helicopter parents.

Now a teacher has come up with a new term – lawnmower parents – to describe parents who mow down obstacles that may get in their kids’ way and create stress. The teacher posted something on Facebook that got thousands of likes. She tells a story of a kid being called into the principal’s office because a parent stopped in to bring the child something that the child forgot at home. The teacher expected that maybe it was the child’s lunch or their inhaler or their homework. Instead, the dad who was wearing a suit was dropping off an expensive water bottle filled with purified water after receiving repeated texts from his child. There are water fountains, of course, all over the school and the child would not have died from thirst, but the child repeatedly demanded that dad bring the water bottle so he dutifully complied. The lawnmower parent.

People around the country responded to this Facebook post. One teacher said that a parent of a high school student asked her to walk her son to class to ensure that he wouldn’t be late. Another teacher said that parents requested that someone from the cafeteria blow on her child’s too hot lunch to cool it down for them. We redefined things in America so that anything that might be a bit unpleasant is now seen as unsafe. An unpleasant statement, an unpleasant experience, an unpleasant consequence. If it’s unpleasant we shouldn’t have to deal with it and neither should our children. The problem, of course, is by removing all unpleasantness and all risk from life we significantly impair people’s resilience which is essential for success in life.

Researchers have found that for your immune system to work in a healthy way, it actually requires exposure to real threats. You see, our immune systems are a miracle of design. We now think that people do best in a sterile environment, like a hospital

operating room running around with wipes on everything, and anti-bacterial this and that. You know, our ancestors lived in total filth. Dirt everywhere – they didn't have alcohol wipes. Now many people can't fight off bacteria.

What am I getting at? Here's the principle:

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Some risk is good for us and for our kids.

Not only is some risk good for us and for our kids as individuals, but some risk is good for us Vineyard people collectively as a church.

We need to risk. We need to risks if we're going to continue to be instruments of God's kingdom purposes in our changing community and in our changing world.

This New Year, I'm starting a new series titled "The Challenge of Change". Today's message is titled "The Call to Change". Let's pray.

Over the next month, we're going to look at four figures from the Old Testament – Abraham, Moses, Joshua and Rahab – all of whom model to us faith in the face of changes in their lives. We're going to look at the stories from the 11th chapter of the New Testament book of Hebrews. So, today, let's look at Abraham.

Slide Hebrews 11:8-9

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

Abraham is the Bible's model of what faith looks like over the course of one's life.

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Modeling faith

So many people want to be leaders. They try to train others based upon something they recently read or recently heard or recently saw someone else do. Leadership is more caught than taught. We reproduce what we are. The reason to look at Abraham is because he is the role model of faith. If you want to understand what faith looks like over the course of someone's life, study the life of Abraham. Abraham is revered by the entire monotheistic world – Jews, Muslims and Christians – as the Father of Faith. The Apostle Paul writes this:

Slide Galatians 3:9

⁹ So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Slide Romans 4:16

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

Faith is a way of life for God's people. Faith is a lifelong journey – left foot, right foot, left foot. Faith is not just something you go in for when you choose as an initial matter to trust Christ for your salvation. We do start with faith. No one can come to God unless they entrust themselves to God and trust in God's provision of forgiveness and acceptance, purchased by the blood of Jesus at the cross. Faith is not just something you go in for at the beginning of your Christian life or when you're young. As the prophet Habakkuk said:

Slide Habakkuk 2:4

⁴ "See, the enemy is puffed up;
his desires are not upright—
but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness —

Many translations say "but the righteous person will live by his faith".

Abraham was 75 years old when he was called by God to leave his home, his relatives, his community and his possessions and to travel to a destination that was unknown to him. At the age of 75 he was called to trust God. He didn't get done with faith after he first met God or after he first entrusted himself to God. God kept asking him to continue to believe in this season of life. Whatever age you are, God asks you at your point in life to be open to risk again, to be open to change, to be available to him.

A few weeks ago, I turned 63. I've been pastoring this church since 1987 as our first and only senior pastor. This year I'll celebrate our 32nd year as pastor of Vineyard Columbus. Like Abraham, God is calling me at my age, and you at your age, to take risks again in this season of life.

Abraham also modeled:

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Obedient faith

Here's what we read in verse 8:

Slide Hebrews 11:8

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

We look back at the Old Testament story from which this is drawn and see this:

Slide Genesis 12:1, 4a

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

Abraham took God at his word. He understood that God was the boss, that God was the leader, and that life only works when we obey the Lord. This is a basic faith lesson. This is the foundation of faith. The Lord leads and we follow. There’s nothing more fundamental than that.

For years at Vineyard Columbus, we have built our church on this belief that Jesus is the head of the church. He’s the head of the church universal and he’s the head and leader of this local church, Vineyard Columbus. We’ve always wanted to be a church where Jesus calls the shots. Not the pastor or the board or the deacons, not the big givers, not some politically powerful in-group. Like Abraham, we have sought to be a people who were obedient and responsive to the voice of God.

Over the past two or three years, I have felt, in an increasing way that I was to turn the leadership of Vineyard Columbus over to my successor when I turn 65. That happens in December of 2020.

Experts say that the best succession planning is gradual, thoughtful, intentional and one with lots of information shared along the way. That’s the kind of succession planning we want to have at Vineyard Columbus. That’s why we’re announcing the succession plan two years before my transition to another role on Vineyard Columbus’ church staff. I’M NOT RETIRING! Let me say this in a different way: I’M NOT GOING ANYWHERE AND I’M NOT RETIRING!!

The plan is for me to continue to preach at the church as part of a preaching team, to mentor young pastors, to help other churches and to relate to leaders in our city and beyond while I’m still healthy at least until I turn 70. Marlene and I have spent our entire adult lives at Vineyard Columbus serving this church. We came to this church 41 years ago when we were 21 years old before we had a pastor. We love this church. We love what God has done with us and we want to continue to invest our lives in the Vineyard. But I believe Vineyard Columbus would benefit by us having a younger, different leader who has fresh vision for our church’s future, an ability to reach the next generations and especially the growing number of unchurched people – who call

themselves “Nones” (no church, maybe no real connection with God) with fresh strategies and new approaches.

So what did we do to thoughtfully, intentionally, prayerfully consider my successor?

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1 – A two day retreat

To test this internal sense, two years ago a few of Vineyard Columbus’s most senior leaders took a several day retreat to seek the Lord about our church’s future and to try to answer several key questions. Among the questions we tackled was this:

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What things about Vineyard Columbus do we believe should never change?

Regarding things about Vineyard Columbus that we believed should always be preserved, we listed (among other things) a strong commitment to:

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- Submitting to the authority of the Scriptures and continuing to have excellent preaching based upon kingdom theology.
- Engaging in effective evangelism, church planting and global missions.
- Being a racially and ethnically diverse church that passionately pursues racial reconciliation
- Welcoming the person, the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit and the practice of all the biblical gifts of the Holy Spirit
- Having women and men serving side-by-side in leadership at every level of our church.
- Embracing a holistic approach to mission including the continuance of the Vineyard Community Center and a both-and approach to our faith and practice
- Practicing unity with the global Christian church and team-based ministry within our local church.
- Promoting leaders who are full of integrity, have healthy marriages (if married), passionately in love with Vineyard Columbus, self-sacrificial, advocates and practitioners of our values, Spirit-led, prayerful, biblically rooted, lifelong learners, evangelistic, visionary, humble and full of pastoral courage.

Because we feel so strongly about our DNA – we briefly considered doing a nationwide search for my successor but decided that our particular DNA was so unique that we really needed to focus upon internal candidates who were deeply committed long-standing practitioners of these values.

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2. The hiring of a consultant

Following the retreat, our leadership team hired a nationally known church consultant to interview our staff, ask us hard questions and assist us to create a successful pathway for our future. A part of that pathway included the naming of a Selection Committee.

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3. The role of the Selection Committee

Over the past year, a Selection Committee made up of nine pastors and lay leaders has repeatedly met to pray, to interview potential candidates for consideration for the job of Vineyard Columbus's next Senior Pastor and to make a recommendation to the Church Council and our Pastoral Advisory Team regarding my successor.

The Church Council (a combined group of several pastors and key lay leaders) and our Pastoral Advisory Team (a group of eight Vineyard Columbus pastors) have the final decision under Vineyard Columbus's by-laws regarding my successor.

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4. Much prayer

Over the past two years, the future of Vineyard Columbus and our future Senior Pastor(s) has been the subject of literally hundreds of hours of prayer and days of fasting. As I said before, we have always believed, and have tried as best as we can to practice the biblical truth that **Jesus is the head of the church** not us! So we have sought and re-sought the leading of the Holy Spirit through every step of this process.

While I was on sabbatical this past summer, I took a retreat at a monastery in order to pray about the succession decision. We did have several amazing internal candidates who were under consideration as my successor. Certainly, Dr. Charles Montgomery was never far from my thoughts. He's an extraordinary preacher and significant leader not only at Vineyard Columbus, but throughout the Vineyard movement. He will serve on our future core leadership team and as a Teacher-at-Large, releasing Charles to be more available for teaching at our campuses and within the larger Vineyard Movement, while he continues to serve as East Campus Pastor. But the Lord spoke to me while I was at the monastery and said that the decision regarding my successor would be a community decision. In other words, the Holy Spirit would confirm God's choice not just by my own sense of who my successor should be, but by a broad consensus of leaders at Vineyard Columbus.

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5. Community Confirmation

The Holy Spirit confirmed what he said to me at the retreat. The community did speak. The Selection Committee was unanimous in its recommendation and their

recommendation was unanimously confirmed by our church council and our PAT, the two governing boards of our church under our by-laws.

In fact, to check the findings of the Selection Committee, we surveyed more than a dozen church leaders – both male and female – of different ethnicities and ages. I asked open-ended questions including who ought to succeed me. With few exceptions, there was remarkable unanimity among those informally surveyed. So who was chosen?

About a decade ago, I felt that Eric Pickerill might become my successor. I saw in him the kind of leadership qualities that would be necessary to lead a church as large as Vineyard Columbus. I respect his pastoral warmth, his passion for the lost, his intelligence, his creativity and his commitment to Vineyard values and the way people respond to his leadership. I also respect the way that God used Eric to build Joshua House (our twenty-something ministry) into a thriving community of more than 800 young adults.

Eric and I spoke about the possibility of him succeeding me before he and Julia left for Amsterdam to lead Vineyard Columbus' church planting team. While in Amsterdam, Julia had an opportunity to lead alongside of Eric as co-senior pastors. The Amsterdam church planting team thrived under their co-leadership. But more than that, they were able to plant a healthy, flourishing church in one of the most secular cities on earth and then turn the church over to indigenous leadership after seven years.

The lessons that Eric and Julia learned while leading the church on their own, far from Vineyard Columbus, in a very secular environment, will serve Vineyard Columbus as we face an increasingly post-Christian environment in America. Living in Europe for seven years gave Eric and Julia the tools Vineyard Columbus will need as we learn to do church in a culture that increasingly does not support Christianity.

The Lord spoke plainly to Eric and Julia while they were exploring church planting options upon their return to the US. The Lord said to them that they were to come back and serve at Vineyard Columbus! It was unexpected word for them, especially since starting a new church is easier than taking over an existing church from a long-serving pastor. But God spoke and that settled the matter for Eric and Julia. They feel called by the Lord to serve Vineyard Columbus!

Over the past year, I've had the opportunity to watch Julia up close as she served in the role of pastor to our staff. She has been exceptional in caring for staff, in pointing staff to Jesus, and in helping create a healthier staff environment. The staff at Vineyard Columbus universally adores Julia. I've also found Julia to be an exceptional planner and extraordinary communicator.

So, we have chosen two people to serve as my successors – Eric and Julia Pickerill.

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Picture of the Pickerills

They have a great, strong, loving marriage. They are wonderful parents. They love the Lord and this church with all their hearts.

Eric and Julia have been appointed as Associate Pastors at Vineyard Columbus, starting this month. They will work together with me and our broader leadership team to continue learning and developing so that they may successfully pastor our church in a couple of years. You'll be seeing more of Eric and Julia in our preaching rotation. But otherwise, you shouldn't notice any other big changes at our church over the next two years. We continue to hold fast to the incredible deposits that God has given to us over our history.

As we pray for Eric and Julia, would those of you **at all of our campuses** extend a hand and we'll pray together as one church for these two?

Call Eric and Julia up to the stage.

How will this plan of succession succeed? We need Abraham-like faith.

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- Abraham's modeling faith
- Abraham's responsive faith

And finally, we need Abraham's

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Risk-taking faith

Hebrews 11:8 says,

Slide Hebrews 11:8

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

Why would anyone change what is comfortable, what is successful, what is familiar and opt for the uncomfortable, the unfamiliar, the different? The only reason is because they have really heard from God. As I mentioned at the outset, John Wimber the Father of the Vineyard movement used to say,

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Faith is spelled R-I-S-K

As long as a bird stays in its nest, it does not know the wonder of flight. So long as a child clings to the edge of the pool, that child will never know the wonder of having the water hold your body up as you swim. So long as we hold on to the familiar and the safe and the comfortable we never know what God would do if only we had said “yes” to him.

Can you say, “One time in my life I took a major risk because of Jesus”? I didn’t play it safe. At some point, brother or sister, your faith needs to be tested. At some point, the faith of this church needs to be tested. There is risk in almost everything we do.

Single people, there’s a risk anytime you ask someone out whom you are interested in. You may be turned down. There’s a risk that someone won’t give you their phone number. A risk to our egos that we’re going to feel rejected. If you don’t ask, there’s no chance you’ll ever get a “yes”. You’ll never know what a relationship with this other person might have been like.

You’re unhappy with your job. There’s a risk in applying for a new job. You may not feel like you have all the qualifications. You’re not always going to be the smartest and the brightest. Sometimes we’re really suited for a job and we still get turned down. But if we don’t risk, we stay unhappy in our job and keep complaining.

There’s a risk when you’re the first one to say to someone you’re dating, “I love you.” They might not say it back. And you’ll never know what it feels like to love another person and have them love you back.

There’s a risk in admitting you made a mistake, admitting you were wrong. The most insecure people in the world are noted by one thing. They will never admit they were wrong. They always double down. It’s not strength that causes a person to refuse to admit wrong. It’s weakness because the person is afraid of being vulnerable. The person who admit to ever being wrong is afraid of giving power to someone else – power to disapprove of them.

There’s a risk in engaging in global missions. Abraham was called to leave his father’s house, abandon everything familiar. Those who engage in global missions, like so many folks have from this church, are choosing to walk in obedience to God. Pushing your chips out on the table and saying “I’m going to take a risk, Lord. You’re faithful. You won’t let me down.”

And the risk can change getting off the familiar path and taking the road less traveled, allowing ourselves to be uncomfortable for a little while. There is a risk in change.

You know, Vineyard Columbus has always been a church that's willing to risk change as we follow the leadership of our Lord Jesus. We took the risk of change when we joined the Vineyard movement 32 years ago. The same Sunday I became our first senior pastor we also joined the Vineyard movement. We believed that joining a movement that welcomed the presence and power of the Holy Spirit would renew and refresh the church and God was faithful. He did renew and refresh our church with his presence.

We took a risk of change when as a little church, we followed the leadership of our Lord Jesus and built our first building on Cooper Road. We believed that the Lord would grow the church if we moved and invested and we built – and God did grow the church. He was faithful.

We took a risk of change when as an evangelical church, we promoted women to be pastors and church planters and elders and leaders. We believed the Lord Jesus was leading us to unleash the calls of women and the Lord was faithful. He did bless us.

We took a risk of change when as a largely white church at the beginning of the 21st century we followed the leadership of our Lord Jesus and we made a series of deliberate decisions to break down ethnic and racial walls and become a multiethnic and multiracial church. We believed that this would bear witness to God's reconciling power in our community. God was faithful. One of the hallmarks of this church is our diversity.

We risked change as we followed the leadership of the Lord Jesus to model a fuller gospel, not just a gospel of saving souls but of healing people in all dimensions of life. We opened our community center. We became a church that offered people in our community free medical care and free dental services and tutoring for their kids and English as a Second Language and citizenship classes and GED classes and free legal services and on and on. God blessed us. Now, thousands of people are being ministered to every month through our Vineyard Community Center because God is faithful.

Over the next two years, indeed over the next few decades, I believe God is leading us to change again. To pick up our tents like Abraham and move out so we can be more available to him, to reach new people, younger people, unchurched people, people who are far from God. Faith is spelled R-I-S-K. Will you join me in following the Lord Jesus in taking this risk with me? Let's pray.

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Hebrews 11:8-9

- I. Modeling faith

- II. Obedient faith

- III. Risk-taking faith