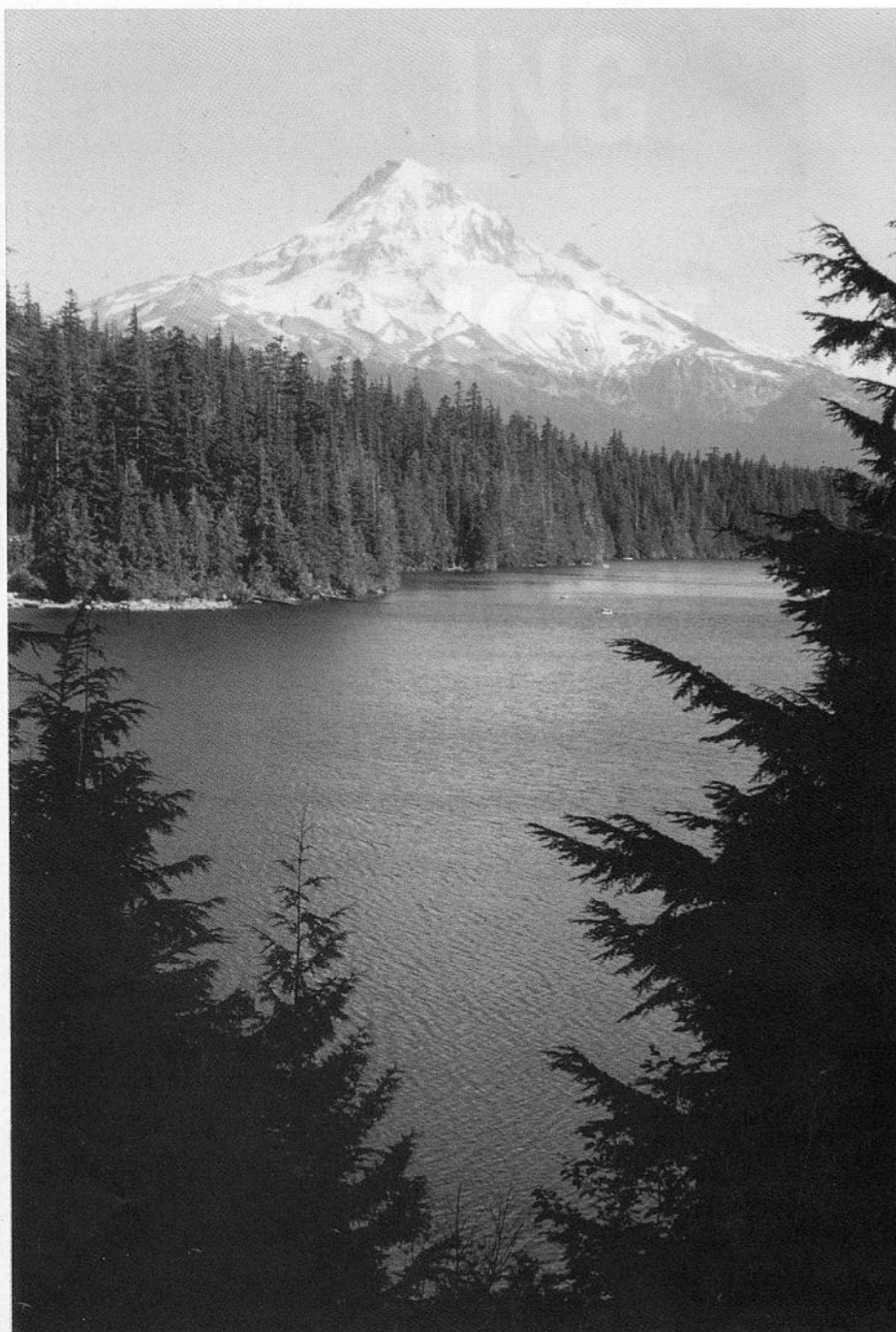




TASTING THE VINEYARD

IAN CARSON had always wanted to visit Oregon. He and his family also wanted to visit old friends now living near Seattle. The Carsons 'did' the Pacific north-west of the USA on a shoestring and prayer, making a particular point of worshipping at Vineyard churches

The dream of some pioneers of the 1840s was that the hard trail to Oregon would be the journey to the promised land. We too travelled with spiritual expectations. Ours were of what we might find of benefit to us as Anglicans in the Vineyard churches there.

The Vineyard movement was founded in California by John Wimber, whose background, like ours, lay in music. His church majors on worship, on revelation from the Word through signs and wonders, and on healing.

Vineyard worship is especially effective at opening people to the power of the Holy Spirit, whose living, abiding intimacy is at the heart of the movement.

Former restaurant

There were seven fellowships in each of the two states we visited.

Our first experience of their worship was in Seattle one Sunday morning. We had to search round some rather run-down back streets in the university area before we eventually located the church, whose entrance boasted a coffee stall. The meeting hall on the first floor was a former restaurant with art deco.

First surprise was to be offered coffee as soon as we sat down. First impression was of being welcome.

Second impression was the sheer quality of the music, the sound reinforcement system, and the projection of the choruses (slides are in, OHP out).

Third was the range of the congregation, measured both by age and social groupings. The children found excitement and fun in what was there for them.

My glance fell on one of the keyboard players in the band, a man in his fifties who looked as if he had eaten, drunk, and lived too hard. His playing was fantastic, both in inspiration and technique.

Our second surprise came when he stepped out of the band and revealed himself as the pastor, Ed Cook.

We were told afterwards that he had played the full repertoire of the forbidden discords in life which tempt musicians before coming to God.

He preached to the heart with passion and fluency, and with an underlying theme which was to emerge at each fellowship we visited, that of relationships.

The meeting room was not only a venue for Sunday worship. During the week it was opened up to the homeless. They could sleep there and showers were provided - an appropriate way of making use of the space on

After the service there were gifts of bananas from the supermarket and cinnamon bread

all seven days. We left with only one negative impression, and this was common to all the fellowships, namely that there were empty seats. We asked members about this, and they claimed much better attendance outside the vacation season.

At Pleasant Valley

A fortnight later we were in the south of Oregon worshipping among a Vineyard fellowship at Pleasant Valley near the town of Grant's Pass.

This is a rural community where there is hardship because of the recession in the logging industry. Deprived areas tend to be marked out by large petrol-guzzling cars, relics of an era left behind by the more affluent owners of Euro-style compacts.

The vehicles parked outside this fellowship were the affluent's legacy to the poor, a scrap-heap of environmental greed.

The fellowship met in the Christian school it ran, whose declared philosophy was 'to show a student not how to face the world, but how to face God'.

Well, the local boys were not too saintly to go outside and kick a football around with our son Aaron, but they were used to having the Bible fully integrated into their school curriculum.

There was an individual welcome on entry and interest in who we were. Neighbours struck up conversations with us. Some families were sitting at tables with doughnuts and coffee, some worshippers were reaching in heavenward ecstasy.

Stand or sit, it doesn't matter; what's respected here is that you are openly yourself.

Steve Shaw, the pastor, played the guitar. He has been at Pleasant Valley for long enough to see the fellowship change from a community church, which went through the crisis which seems endemic to such groups, into a member of the Vineyard.

After the service there were gifts, which brought back memories of beneficence at our local community church in Hemyock, where we worshipped briefly.

At Hemyock there are free eggs.



'The promised land of the pioneers': opposite, Mount Hood and Lost Lake, Oregon. Above, the Carson children at Oleonta Falls, Oregon. Below: at Pleasant Valley the fellowship meets in its school



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Thank you

Here it was bananas from the local supermarket and cinnamon bread.

More seriously, we were reassured by a band which was both amateur and effective. One trumpeter took a free solo which filled the room with golden spiritual sound fit to grace the courts of heaven.

It reminded us of accomplished and soul-searching tenor sax and alto flute solos we had enjoyed in Seattle, and how musical instruments can speak visions.

The theme of the sermon here was revival, not as some great campaigning mission, but on an urgent and ongoing neighbour-to-neighbour relationship basis.

Pleasant Valley's welcome pack was a model. It came in an envelope which

We wanted to find the time of Sunday worship in Bend but were 22 miles from the nearest phone

spells out 'What you can expect here' before you even open it.

Inside, the notice sheet stands out by its colour. Read it and you find no shame in poverty. 'Food - for assistance with food contact...' 'Clothing - ministry is through the kitchen. Take what you need and bring what you don't need'.

Home groups are called 'Meta', from the Greek, highlighting that to join one is to seek change. The groups' declared aim is 'loving, learning, deciding, doing' and the pack contains more information about them, stylishly presented.

'The Visions of the Vineyard' quotes Proverbs on the title page: 'Where there is no vision or continuing revelation, the people cast off restraint and perish.'

Nature's revelation

Sometimes nature can bring its own revelations. One calm, sunny morning we gazed down on Crater Lake, where seven thousand years ago the volcano Mount Mazama blew its top.

Molten snow filled the wound, and annealed into a profoundly deep glass-like lake, mirroring to perfection the mountains of the rim and the heavens above.

As we marvelled at the spectacle, the air was miraculously filled with the sound of a choir of children's voices performing Christian songs.

The neat, bright-eyed oriental youngsters were up from San José in

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California, honouring the beauty which God had bestowed on that natural arena with their worshipful singing.

Our journey took us further up the volcanic spine of Oregon to Bend, a sought-after winter sports resort area where nature's slag heaps of cindered rock separate forest wilderness from high desert.

We camped at Little Lava Lake, 5,000 feet up, near freezing at night. As we discovered when we wanted to find out the time of the Sunday worship in Bend, we were 22 miles from the nearest phone.

We left the time of the worship in God's care. Despite the dust roads and the deer, we completed the 45-mile journey to his schedule with, as it turned out, two minutes to spare.

Vacation mood

Pastor Mike Prato's Hawaiian shirt proclaimed the vacation mood, and the fellowship met in a purpose-designed church building.

The worship leader, as everywhere, was an affirmative man. I found my wife voicing my inward thoughts that maleness in this role has special qualities. We found ourselves debating whether they were relevant to family worship in our Anglican church, where necessity dictates that women dominate the role.

As elsewhere on our visit, many of the choruses were familiar to us and we were able to join in. It was touching to see couples worshipping ardently arm-in-arm, and to be asked to lay a blessing on our children before they went to their groups.

The sermon put the intimacy and security of a relationship centred on the Holy Spirit in the context of the enemy's power to undermine those qualities and rob us of the senses of identity and acceptance.

Our children emerged with a verse to learn, and the notice sheet we were given had a drop-in programme of daily Bible readings, plus three verses to commit to memory in the week ahead.

The notices revealed that there is a time of prayer starting an hour before Sunday morning worship, that the prayer chain has a night emergency line, and that home groups take turns in offering ministry after the service.

Also in Bend (but closed on Sunday) was a marvellous Christian bookshop, kitted out with half-a-dozen cassette players plus headphones and demo copies of all the worship cassettes they had in stock. We left it richer in literature and worship music and grateful that our credit card worked.

Our final Vineyard church was in



'His love is higher. . . his love is deeper. . . ' (a Vineyard song). Above: Crater Lake, Oregon. Below: the Wallowa Mountains, Oregon



Oregon's capital, Portland, where the pastor and his Swedish wife were a couple with film-star looks, appropriately as it happened, because the fellowship met in a cinema.

Posters for the film *Indecent Proposal* somehow tainted the place, and the fellowship lacked the spiritual homeliness we had experienced elsewhere.

Maybe a room has to be claimed firmly for God before worship can take off. Even Arlan Askew's inspiring preaching on relationships could not wholly erase the impression that this was a struggling fellowship.

Thanks to instant cassette duplication, we were able to pick up a copy of his sermon as we walked out of church.

I hear him guiding his flock towards relationships which aspire to more than learning to live with someone's

faults, and which strive after the model which Paul urges on the Ephesians, the aim being to keep the unity of the Spirit.

Arlan pointed us right back to spiritual basics, and the words 'In the beginning God...' It should be true of relationships as it is true of creation.

At an Anglican church in Somerset recently, I was one of a handful attending what proved to be a painful parody of choral evensong. I found that the notice sheet included meetings whose subjects had nothing to do with God or even religion.

By contrast, all we experienced in these Vineyard churches convinced us that God was in everything from the beginning. Fellowships were empowered not by hierarchies, faculties, or statutory bodies, but by the inspiration and revelation from relationships which begin with God. ▲