



# Episode 108: The Dinner Service Dilemma

**Featuring:** Mingo Palacios & Ted Vaughn

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## Transcript:

Mingo Palacios:

This is Part 2 of a conversation with my good friend Ted Vaughn. I'm calling this episode "The Dilemma of Dinner Service." Listen as he helps me identify some of the breakdowns that I have in my own strategic leadership concerning one of the ministries at our church and how his input helps me identify some of the ways I can help bring more clarity to that ministry.

I was talking, if I can jar your mind, and you gave me some answers on when I have new, excited members or attendees in our church who want to bring something to the table that I, in my – what I would call not fatherly pastoral advice – I don't think I'm there yet – I'm more like a young dad when it comes to being a pastor. I just don't want to see them fail.

Some of the things that I've experienced in ministry past, I go, "Hey, if you launch this idea without some of these core wireframes, like consistent leadership

meetings, like consistent communication channel to those who consider themselves on the team, this great idea will start like a firework and it will be over as quick as a firework loses its own lifetime.” I just don’t want that for them, partly because I’ve experienced it in my own ministry past. I sent a great idea to the market way too fast.

Ted Vaughn:

I am fine with failure and piloting. I think there’s something actually really helpful about piloting something. I think the idea of a pilot is something we in the church could do better with, which is to say “This seems viable. This idea seems to be right. Let’s pilot it for 3 months or one event, whatever it is, and then we’ll review. We’ll see how it went. Maybe we kill it, maybe we don’t do it.”

Mingo Palacios:

Or amongst a small segment of the whole.

Ted Vaughn:

Right, whatever it is. Pilot something. The challenge is that if you pilot something and you don’t plan into your pilot – we’re going to stop, review, ask hard questions, and then launch more publicly. I don’t know what the Dinner Service trajectory was, but I would argue –

Mingo Palacios:

This is a great – you can use it as a model. You can bring it in.

Ted Vaughn:

I would argue you’re still piloting it.

Mingo Palacios:

You need to give Dinner Service a definition from your vantage point, because our listeners may not know the complexity of our Dinner Service.

Ted Vaughn:

Dinner Service at Torrey Pines Church is this very cool environment around tables where there’s a meal served. It’s always really good food. It’s unbelievable how well you provide quality food for such a little cost. There is typically art or music or somebody speaking. It tends to be consistent in format. Sometimes it varies. It has felt, for the first 3 months or so, like it was “we’re experimenting, we’re trying something out.” It was exciting, it was new. You came with an open hand.

I would argue at some point after that 3 or 4 month period, it would've been time to say "Pilot over. What have we learned? Do we do a new pilot? Do we keep this going?" But at some point it moved from pilot to official. But there was never – I would argue not a clearly defined sense of how this adds value or expectation alignment around "This is an alternative service for a community who prefer to go at night." "No, this is a service that is designed for small groups to go deeper in relationship by breaking bread." Or "No, this is first and foremost a service that's designed for pre-Christians, low barrier to entry, meal."

Whatever the answer is to ultimate intention, now content is shaped to serve that. Now setting, now – but I think in absence of that, you can end up having somebody give a message and it feels like a 1995 Calvary Chapel message and you're going, "Is this on point?" Then you'll have a singer/songwriter who comes and does great music, never talks about Jesus at all, and you're like, "Is that right?"

What content best informs the goal or purpose or intention of this environment? Who is this mostly for? How do we set that up and communicate that within our existing – sorry.

Mingo Palacios:

Which is the best question for me to hear.

Ted Vaughn:

Is this too raw? Is this too soon? [laughs]

Mingo Palacios:

No, it's not too raw. And honestly, if it was too raw I would just take it because I know it's probably going to serve other people out there.

If you've missed it, if you're trying to follow along and wonder what it is that we're talking about, when something experimental comes off the runway and it's got a little bit of altitude in your ministry and you're wondering, "Should we keep it? Should we kill it? Do we give it more time to maybe define itself?", what you need to do is invite a person like Ted into your world. Somebody like Ted is probably in your camp saying, "Hey, do you have clarity on what this thing is becoming?"

When Ted asked me that question, I was like, “Not quite.” Honestly, I’m very comfortable with the ambiguity of something just being out there, but I realize in the position I now carry, I’m not afforded a long runway for ambiguity. People need to know with clarity, “What is it that you’re asking me to subscribe to?”

Ted Vaughn: It’s one thing to have ambiguity on whether or not a strategy is working to accomplish a specific end. It’s another thing to have ambiguity on what the end actually is.

Mingo Palacios: Totally. That’s actually where we are.

Ted Vaughn: I would argue everything you did at The Rock, 1825 –

Mingo Palacios: Right, my former employers.

Ted Vaughn: The ambiguity was, is this actually going to work? There was no ambiguity on who it’s for, why you’re doing it, what success looks like. The challenge with the Dinner Service has been I don’t think you’ve had enough clarity on who it’s for, what success looks like, why we’re doing it.

Then we can ask the question, “Is this Dinner Service, this dinner setting, this location, this food, are these things working?” Live in that ambiguity. It’s one thing to have ambiguity about tactics; it’s another thing to have ambiguity about purpose.

Mingo Palacios: Super good. That could’ve been a mic drop moment. Ring the cowbell.

Ted Vaughn: In church, one of the best questions – and frankly, people stumble over this all the time and I don’t get it – is just asking the question of audience. This chips at churches all the time. Who are you on mission with? Easy question. Who are you on mission for? “Well, it’s who we’re on mission with, right?” Is it? Or is it not?

For some churches it’s like, “Who we’re on mission for is the people we haven’t reached yet. It’s all about evangelism.” It’s an obvious answer. For other churches it’s not. Then take that down to an event.

You're doing a Vacation Bible School or kids' camp or whatever you call it.

Mingo Palacios: Men's tailgate party.

Ted Vaughn: What does success look like? Is this a top-of-funnel, reach pre-Christians, low barrier to entry opportunity? Or is this about deepening relationships of existing men? You've got to answer that, because that informs –

Mingo Palacios: If you don't, you just have – yeah.

Ted Vaughn: If you don't, then you just have a great event and you have no idea why you had it. The only metric that drives success is "Well, we liked it. The bacon was good." At some point you have to have a deeper metric for why you do stuff.

Mingo Palacios: That boils down to good stewardship or not.

Ted Vaughn: To me, just starting with audience. Who is this for and what does success look like based on the answer to that?

Mingo Palacios: Let's continue down this Dinner Service road. I started with the intention – I pitched this vision, let's make this for young adults. Let's try to aim this uniquely at young adults, but let's not call it a young adult service because it'll alienate –

Ted Vaughn: See, this is the first time I've heard that.

Mingo Palacios: Yeah. This is breaking news, folks. This is TMZ podcast. Breaking news. I say to the people on the napkin in the coffee shop, "I want to build a young adult-centric service that will not feel or seem like the other services that we have. The reason being is if the other services that we have, the way they're programmed, were attracting young adults, I wouldn't even be asking this question. Because that model's not working, let's build something else and let's see if we can get them through the door."

Ted Vaughn: Why isn't the other model working?

Mingo Palacios: For another episode. [laughs]

Ted Vaughn: I'm not actually asking that. My point is I think it would –

Mingo Palacios: I think the environment, the intentionality to know and be known, the one-to-many versus many engaged across a table for one another – there's a bunch of factors. I think some people conditionally go to church because that's what they do. It's habit, not heart. It's sad to say that, but that's why they're there.

For people who have no sense of heart in the sense that church and Jesus is for them, I want to create an environment where when they step in, they go "This doesn't feel like what I always thought church felt like. I'll stick around." That's why the environment matters so much at Dinner Service.

Now, 3 or 4 months later, while I'm intending for young adults to be the key market – I net them, the team nets young adults – but then we see the riverbanks widen, and it starts pulling in families. They come with their 5-year-old, they come with their 11-year-old. We see empty nesters show up at Dinner Service. We see these cool – they've got students who are in high school or post high school and they're coming together.

I look to the team and the team looks confused. They don't know how to engage people across the spectrum. The table conversation is skewed, because now you have an 11-year-old at the table, so when you're talking about how you struggle with fill-in-the-blank, it becomes very – the chaos increases.

Ted Vaughn: That happened because the marketing or communication about the Dinner Service never –

Mingo Palacios: Insinuated.

Ted Vaughn: Or even attempted to narrow. It was just "Hey, you might like this. Come check it out."

Mingo Palacios: Right. Because it landed in the roster of all of our other services – I said we have an 8:00, 10:00, 12:00,

and now we're adding a 6:00 – from the outside looking in, people just said, "This is for me also in a new timeslot, with a great pesto dinnerplate alongside of it." So from the get-go, it could've been better clarified externally.

But now I've got them. Dinner Service now, a season later, is full of families, it's full of college students, emerging leaders post-college.

Ted Vaughn: What you could do – I know we're doing this real-time on a podcast.

Mingo Palacios: I love it.

Ted Vaughn: What you could do is say, "We're going to take a 3 month break from Dinner Service." You send an invite to everybody who's gone, because I'm assuming you have some sort of database.

Mingo Palacios: Yeah.

Ted Vaughn: You say, "We're going to have a family meeting" or whatever you call it, "to talk about what you liked, what you didn't like, what questions you had." Invite large group. From that large group, pick a handful of people to become a steering team. Meet with that team and then together, hash out, "If we relaunch this, why? Who's it for? What does that mean?" Really refine it.

Mingo Palacios: Give it back to the people and have them identify what it could or should be.

Ted Vaughn: You're leading through the people, but you're doing it with them because the process is the product.

Mingo Palacios: That was great. Ooh, write that down, everybody. The process is the product.

Ted Vaughn: In any church, the way you get to where you want to get is as important. It's the gospel.

Mingo Palacios: See how Ted is helping me strategically lead my own messes right here, right now? [laughs]

Ted Vaughn: It's not a mess. You just have a lot of raw material, and at some point you've got to shape that sucker. It's just a mound of clay.

Mingo Palacios: The leaders that exist between me and the people coming, those that are choosing to hold the line, they're looking in both directions because I'm not as clear as I should be. So they're looking to me for greater clarity, but they're also looking to the people to say, "Hey, what do you want this to be?" I think I can do a better job on my end.

Ted Vaughn: This goes back to the question what's an example of inviting a young leader to dream apostolically and do something, and not giving them the right parameters. I would say this right here.

Mingo Palacios: That's awesome. I will be all of your necessary examples.

Ted Vaughn: And Monday morning quarterbacking – that's why I think you pilot. If you pilot and this happens, you know that there's a stop date and you know that you can regroup, get the right people in the room, and go, "What's missing? What do we need? What have we experienced?" I don't think you have to have your perfect, refined act together before you launch. That's a nightmare for any church that has 52 Sundays a year.

Mingo Palacios: You'll never launch.

Ted Vaughn: You'll never launch anything, and that's frankly why most churches don't do anything progressive, because they don't have time. They don't have this black hole of 52 Sundays a year.

So at some point, Minimum Viable Product. I totally believe in that. I think Dinner Service was absolutely a Minimum Viable Product. I just don't think you piloted it with a stop date to then regroup. And if you had piloted it, I would've said pilot it with a niche young adult community. Start there, just communicate it to them, see who comes. If it's 50 people or 40 people, invite them to invite their friends. See what happens, and then 3 months later, process with that.

Mingo Palacios: That's great. Update: we took a 1 month break, essentially. We took the month of January off.

Ted Vaughn: I came.

Mingo Palacios: Yeah.

Ted Vaughn: Not knowing. [laughs]

Mingo Palacios: Ted came and landed in one of our leadership nights. It's funny because we still didn't choose to narrow the audience or how we market. I think we're trying to still discover, what do we want it to be? Further, less, who do we want it to be for? So first what is it, then who's it for? It's been really fun.

Ted Vaughn: Or who's it for, then what is it? Depending on the –

Mingo Palacios: Depending on how you want to answer that question, yeah. I don't think that there's been a clear roadmap out there, which is part of the pain for us in discovering how to birth a new expression. Nonetheless, Jesus's sovereignty is supreme, so people come to know Jesus through it. Leaders walk away feeling encouraged, like they're a part of something that is utilizing their gifts.

For me, having at least Ted, you, across the table from me inside of my circle has helped me ask questions I would never ask myself. I just go, "Hey, just keep blowing air under its wings and eventually it'll learn to fly," whereas I can be much more strategic in the way that I approach my own leaders, my own teams, and say, "What are some proven pathways that can help us identify what this is and what our desire is? And let me help you with some of the things that I have been identifying as far as our church's and our ministry's core beliefs, core vision, core audience. Who do we believe we can reach?" I can serve them tremendously with that information because somebody's asking me about it now. That's all I'm saying.

Ted Vaughn: Yeah, you're an example of I would argue the right type of senior pastor for the next 20 years of ministry because you're wrestling with different problems than

the generation of senior pastors before you. The problems you're wrestling with are, how do we collaborate better? How do we invite people in? How do we stay on mission for those that don't know the Gospel? You're wanting to change the game, and you're doing it with an existing church that isn't quite sure what the new game is.

Mingo Palacios:

Totally. Very much so.

Ted Vaughn:

That tension is tough, but I think more and more young leaders I work with, whether it's Jared Herd at the Church at Rancho Bernardo, or it's Derek Miller, they're all in that – they're unbelievably passionate about the new game which the church should be playing, which I think is the game of being more on mission, leading from the periphery and not trying to align with mainstream culture, because we're not.

But they're doing it with a church that has history. It's why leadership in the local church is one of the hardest places to lead effectively.

Mingo Palacios:

Yeah, it's its own ecosystem and yet it should just be like a Costco cart in the greater experience of life. You should just get a taste of something here that you can go and apply in the wild, any day of the week.

Ted Vaughn:

Which is a great question for churches to wrestle with. That's another – you asked earlier about trends. More churches than I think would care to admit it are asking the question, "Why do we exist? At the end of the day, what is our actual role and function in the lives of our people?"

The old assumptions aren't working, because people are coming less and less. The attendance isn't what it used to be. People are finding it enough to come once a month or less. What does it mean to be community? What does it mean to partner together at a church to do something greater? I don't think churches have ever really had to answer that because they've presumed on –

Mingo Palacios:

Yeah, you're running on the good grace and gas tank of the generation that built the church behind you.

Ted Vaughn: Yeah, and that gap couldn't – we're seeing massive dip in all sorts of things.

Mingo Palacios: Here's my question. We have this question often and over extended periods of time, about how to be better leaders in the seats that we are afforded. I know some people listening to this conversation, cut into several parts, are going, "I need somebody like that bringing up more questions so that I can be better prepared with more answers for the people that I'm leading."

You're on the verge of launching several conversations through your own podcast. What is it going to be called, where can it be found? Just give us a little bit of a breadcrumb trail as to where we can find you if somebody wants to engage in this conversation at a deeper level.

Ted Vaughn: Thanks. I hate promoting.

Mingo Palacios: Oh, stop it, stop it. [laughs]

Ted Vaughn: No, I really do. I can't even look at my own picture.

Mingo Palacios: I don't even say stop it because you do it. I'm just saying today's the day. It's the time.

Ted Vaughn: My own website, tedvaughn.com. In the process of being retooled by two amazing people that you know – Scott Deal, Chris Lupe.

I have been recording podcasts, and I'm going to be doing more and more content development around the theme of strategic leadership. I think those two anchor words combined really is my unique contribution to the larger Kingdom movement, whether it be church or parachurch.

Too many voices on leadership right now, in my opinion. It's everywhere. Everybody's got a leadership podcast. Strategy – tons of conversations about strategy, strategic planning, wisdom, clarity. But the idea of strategic leadership is I think my differentiator. How do we improve our leadership by thinking

strategically, by answering strategic questions, by applying strategy to our own development?

I'll be talking about everything from vision clarity to strategic planning processes versus just strategic planning. What does it mean to have power? I think a lot of emerging leaders don't know how to lead with power because they've never had it before, so they approach senior leadership like an underdog, and they keep hitting people in the face and they don't realize that that punch carries a lot more weight when you're the senior pastor.

And any number of other dynamics around healthy teams. I'm a huge fan of Patrick Lencioni, so integrating a lot of the Table Group concepts of trust-building and healthy conflict.

So, a lot of content, bite-sized chunks, episodic, built into series. That should be hitting sometime first week of March.

Mingo Palacios:

That's awesome.

Ted Vaughn:

Thanks for asking.

Mingo Palacios:

Yeah. You gave us your website. If people want to get in contact with you, what's the best way to get – they go, "Ted, my organization needs a massive overhaul." What's the best contact?

Ted Vaughn:

I'm going to give my Gmail right now, only because I don't even know if the email on my new site is set up yet. [laughs]

Mingo Palacios:

Some people have given their cellphones out on this wire.

Ted Vaughn:

I think Bob Goff changed that game for everybody, dude.

Mingo Palacios:

He changed the game, man.

Ted Vaughn:

It's funny too, because Gary Vaynerchuk and Questlove and all these people I follow, they're like, "Hey, here's my cellphone." I'm like, nah –

Mingo Palacios: Did you fathom? I'm nobody, and I hold my cellphone number –

Ted Vaughn: It's pretty weird, I know. Seriously, though, if anything has – and I love these conversations, so I would be happy to jump on the phone with anybody and just have a chat. At some point I'll have to hang up, but there'll be a minimum period of time where I am absolutely willing to chat.

Mingo Palacios: Don't call looking for a best friend. Call looking for some solutions. [laughs]

Ted Vaughn: My cellphone is 760-310-0923. [laughs]

Mingo Palacios: Regrettably delivering that number across the wire. [laughs]

Ted Vaughn: I may be calling you about post-production.

Mingo Palacios: But an email, if somebody wants to –

Ted Vaughn: Yeah, I think just [tedvaughn@gmail.com](mailto:tedvaughn@gmail.com) right now is the best email just because, again, I don't know if my website has an email set up yet. It's a brave new world for me. Content creation.

Mingo Palacios: I love it. If you're between the ages of let's say 35 and 45 and you've been thrust into a new position of leadership –

Ted Vaughn: Yeah, that's who I'm doing this for. That exact audience.

Mingo Palacios: That's who I am. To have a navigator with you who doesn't have the myopic vision of just one church or two churches that they've been through, but somebody who's been on a landscape of several dozen churches, watching some succeed and watching others maybe not take certain cues and really suffer for it – not that Ted is like the Gandalf of church leadership.

Ted Vaughn: No, not at all.

Mingo Palacios:

But isn't it so valuable to have somebody who can walk into a room and say "Hey, I've seen this before, or I've seen a version of this play out elsewhere"? That's been the gem of every leader that's come across the podcast. They've left something for somebody to pick up and carry and apply to their own ministry context.

Ted's one of those guys, and he can do it straight into that narrow lens of strategic leadership and pastoral insight and how you lead people into and through a vision so that your church can take the kind of shape I think that every leader's heart wants it to take. That's the way I've seen it play out in my own life.

Through this episode and the episodes that have been cut from it, here's my hope: that you are encouraged. If this flew way over your head because you're like, "Mingo, I just want to do cool junior high stuff," you're not exempt from needing to think clearly about leadership. I would argue the more you think about leadership, the better every kid that comes through your ministry is going to experience Jesus and all the things you're trying to convey over time.

If you're encouraged by this episode, I would ask you to share it, tag somebody in, or even comment, and then go find and subscribe to Ted's podcast. We will talk to you guys on the next episode. Thanks, Ted, for being on the show.

Ted Vaughn:

Thanks for having me.

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