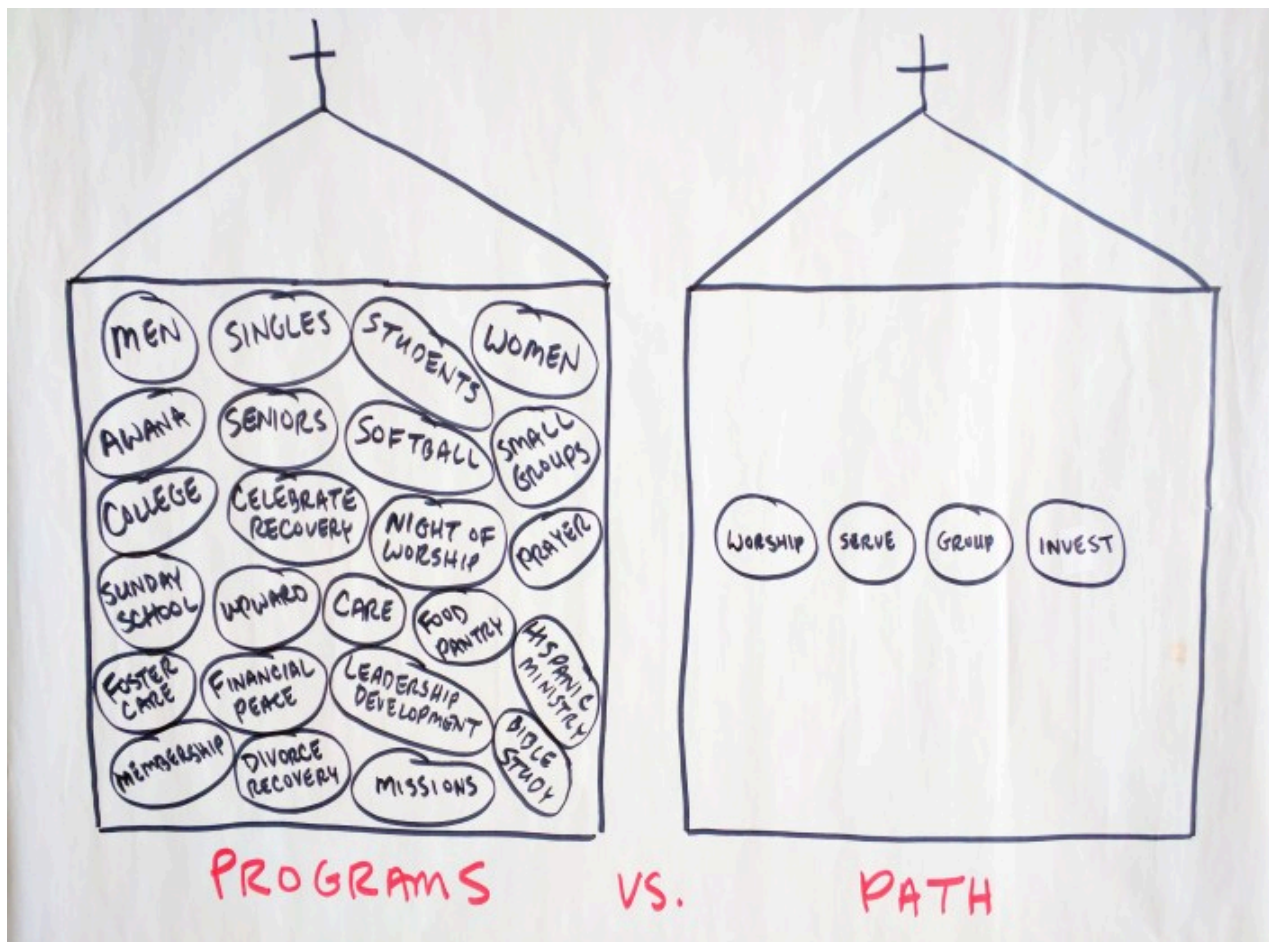


Programs, Paths and Healthy Church Growth

BY TONY MORGAN ON JANUARY 12, 2016 DISCIPLESHIP

I've observed something in healthy, growing churches this last year that I think is very important for church leaders. The churches experiencing the most healthy growth tended to have a discipleship approach in the form of a path. Meaning, they had thought through how they could best help people along in their journey following Christ and offered them a series of next steps.

By contrast, many of the churches I see that are in decline have an overwhelming number of programs available to attendees and even the community, but no cohesive path that helps people learn which steps to take and when.



As you might imagine, there are several key differences between both types of churches...

Distinctives	Programs	Path
What's the win?	Getting more people involved in activities.	Helping more people take a next step.
What gets communicated?	Everything. There's competition for getting people's attention.	One thing. The focus is on helping people take one next step.
How is the church structured?	The structure is built around the programs, which leads to teams operating in silos.	The structure is built around the path with teams working together to encourage movement.
How does it impact volunteer engagement?	More programs mean more demand for volunteers, and many times teams are operating out of a volunteer deficit.	More focus means there's less competition for volunteers and more freedom for people to serve based on their wiring.
What gets prioritized?	Whatever gets on the calendar first.	Whatever helps people move forward on the path.

Here's the reality—every individual is accountable for their own spiritual growth. And, when we look back at our lives, most of the time, it was relationships that helped us grow in our love for Jesus and our desire to follow His way.

The advantage in having a simple, clear discipleship path over an assortment of programs is that you make it easy for new followers of Jesus to build important relationships at the right times in their journey. You give them space to ask their questions and opportunities to exercise their faith. You also make it simpler for church leaders and lead volunteers to not let people fall through the cracks, especially early on when they need the most guidance and time investment.

All that to say, your path — or your programs — are not likely going to ever be so effective in and of themselves that you turn into a spiritual maturity factory. Making disciples is never going to be a tidy process. The Holy Spirit's work can't be replaced by a class or a method. However, a discipleship path will help your church serve people better than a bunch of programs, and as we're seeing, there's at least a correlation between a clear path and healthy growth.

One more thing: Defining a discipleship path without cutting programs won't work. By necessity, the path will become clear when it's the thing you communicate most often and loudest. Keeping all those programs and then trying to communicate your path will only be adding to the noise.

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