

Beware the Perils of Programmatic Thinking

“This time it’s different. We’re not implementing a disciplemaking program!” This leader’s statement thrilled my heart. Too often, churches shop the Christian market for the ideal program to “plug and play” in their church. Author and pastor Greg Ogden writes, ““The committee scours the landscape for a discipleship program that has had proven success. This usually means that they are looking for a system and a curriculum that can be easily implemented in order to provide an accelerated solution . . .” Too many churches are searching for the holy grail of disciplemaking programs.

Let me be candid. I’m a designer of programs. My program designing experience has been international in scope, focused on local churches, and tailored to individuals. Not only have I created programs but I’ve studied what makes a good program. My master’s degree in adult education included coursework on program design. Here’s a basic working definition of a program: *programs are the wise selection of people, events, and resources put together in a timely manner to achieve some desired goals.* There’s nothing inherently wrong with designing a program. Programs are simply a useful means to an end. The real enemy in building a disciplemaking culture is programmatic thinking.

Sometimes we’re not even aware of how we think programmatically. This thinking has deep roots in modernity. The early twentieth century birthed an industrial revolution that produced products for mass consumption. Ford’s invention of the assembly line standardized and efficiently accelerated the mass production of cars. The assumption was that if you designed the right system, the same product will occur every time. Soon, cars, washing machines, and bread were rolling off assembly lines. Modernity views the universe like a well-oiled machine with certain laws governing the effectiveness of the machine’s products. If we can reduce a subject to these “laws” than it can be mass-produced, for mass consumption, distributed widely, and controlled.

Now I enjoy the fruit of modernity. I like knowing the interchangeable parts on my computer or car can be easily replaced and repaired. I like knowing that there are universal laws governing my car’s braking system. However, people and churches are not machines to be rolled off the assembly line. We must be cautious not to bring programmatic thinking into helping people grow into Christ-likeness. When we substitute programmatic thinking for culture building and disciplemaking, life and ministry becomes problematic.

Let me summarize. Programs are useful tools in building disciplemaking cultures. However, programmatic thinking is to be avoided. Programmatic thinking assumes that growth and change happens in a predictable fashion when it’s packaged in a manner that’s easily transferred from one setting to another. Our trust becomes ensnared in the logic and sequence of the program. How do I know when I’m engaged in this type of thinking? Here are some indicators.

Growth follows a timetable. By design, programs have a beginning and an end (unless they become institutionalized and continue forever). Programmatic thinking assumes that when the program ends, the box can be checked off, and life-change has happened. My mentor used to say, “Discipleship is sticking with people until they get it.” It’s not defined by a ten-week Bible study.

We confuse means and ends, form and function. Programmatic thinking assumes that the more a program is replicated the greater the success. As effective as The Navigators 2:7 discipleship program is, our goal is not to see how many 2:7 groups are launched but how many disciples are developed. A program like the 2:7 is a means to growing disciples not the end of how a church measures growth. The “function” is spiritual growth. A program like the 2:7 is a “form” to move towards growth.

We long for certainty. Programmatic thinking assumes that growth is assured when I follow the steps of the program. Following the rules leaves little to chance in the pursuit of success. Life and ministry is not messy but tidy when we follow the program. In reality, discipling and culture building is more like forecasting the weather. Certain atmospheric conditions must be present for rain or snow to occur. The presence of these conditions greatly increase the possibility of rain or sunshine but they do not guarantee the weather.

People become replaceable parts. Programmatic thinking tightly defines a leadership role so that when a person retires or moves on, another takes his or her place. Leadership becomes interchangeable, like a part on an assembly line. We major on filling the position rather than developing the leader. With this mentality we can easily end up using people rather than developing them.

Follow the instructions. Programmatic thinking requires a step-by-step instruction manual so that we do the right thing, at the right time, in the right order, to get the right results. Instead of seeking the wise thing to do (being governed by biblical principles, the Holy Spirit, and the wisdom of experience) we expect someone to tell us what to do next.

A “one-size fits all” approach. Programmatic thinking is like a restaurant franchise, we want the identical sandwich, French fries, and chocolate shake wherever we go. Everything is standardized so that it is reproduced perfectly the next time. Little consideration is given to context, timing, or individual needs.

In closing, programs can be our friends but programmatic thinking substitutes conformity for innovation, rigidity for principled thinking, and treats people as replaceable parts. Beware the perils of programmatic thinking in building a discipling culture.

Questions for discussion

What are some benefits of a quality program?

What did I discover about the differences between leading a quality program and programmatic thinking?

Which example of programmatic thinking is most prevalent in my experience?

What are some steps I can take to remove programmatic thinking from my ministry assumptions?

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All Scripture, unless otherwise noted, is from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

Take the Programmatic Thinking Inventory

Check the box that often describes your church's approach to programs.

- When the program ends, we move to something new. We seldom reflect on what happened in the previous program.
- It's more important to finish the program than slow it down to adapt to people's pace.
- We measure success when nearly everyone in our church gets involved with a program.
- We seldom assess whether we need to change or adapt a program as long as it is successful.
- If a program is not effective its because people aren't following the manual.
- Finding the perfect program or curriculum is important for spiritual growth.
- We keep people in leadership positions until they retire or drop out.
- We spend more time looking for people to fill leadership positions than developing people for leadership.
- Numbers, either attendance or financial, is what's most important in a successful program.
- When confronted with difficulties in running a program, we seek out someone to tell us what to do next.
- If it worked in another church, it should work in our church.
- We seldom ask questions about the needs of our church in selecting a program. We primarily focus on results.