

How to create a discipleship and spiritual formation pathway in your church.

A discipleship pathway in a church serves several vital purposes. It provides a framework to guide people's spiritual growth and development, helping them deepen their relationship with God. It makes discipleship the strategic plan for your community. Discipleship does not simply happen by osmosis but needs to be intentional to guide people on their journey. It also helps a church see where people are being developed and what is next for them.

This discipleship pathway needs to be fully embedded into the church's life; it becomes the DNA. It must affect the preaching, small groups, lent courses, youth work and children's church programs. It needs to be dropped into the church language and inform the intentional culture of the community. It should also inform the mission activity of the church, being evident to those outside the church. The most effective discipleship pathways are the ones that become a movement in the church and not just an organisational tool.

Simply put:

A discipleship pathway is a road map for a church in how we might go about taking people from no faith through to being confident disciples who make other disciples.

1. Define 'disciple' - Keep it simple

How you define 'discipleship' and 'disciple' should be contextualised to your church, making it easy for the congregation to replicate and share. Sticky language is key to helping people remember and reproduce what you believe this is. Making Disciples defines this as "Discipleship is loving and obeying God with your head, heart and hands". Does this work for you or do you want to define it differently? Do think about how people will remember the definition you choose, how it will be implemented and outworked in your context.

2. Clarify the critical steps on your discipleship pathway

You might have your own language for the critical steps on this pathway that fit your context. At Making Disciples, we recognise that there are five basic stages on the discipleship journey.

Stage one: Disbelief to Belief - the first stages of coming to faith and the building blocks of early faith.

Stage two: Belief to Surrender - Accepting Jesus and starting to give every area of your life to him.

Stage three: Surrender to Walking and Emulation - Here, we are starting to do the things we see Jesus doing in the Gospels and learning to make Jesus the blueprint for our lives.

Stage four: Emulation to Multiplication - Where we start seeing people making other disciples.

Stage five: Multiplication to Movement - Where personal disciple-making is now seeing others doing the same. This is high-level leadership multiplication.

What will be your articulation of these key steps? Sometimes Churches use the following....

Stage one - Christian Basics

Stage two - Faith Foundations

Stage three - Faith Formation

Stage four - Practising the way

Stage five - Multiplication

We have heard churches naming these stages as Base Camp 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 out of a mountaineering theme or using other locally appropriate themes.

After naming your stages of discipleship, the aim then is to think through what you are doing as a church in each of these areas that helps people to grow in their Heads, Hands and Hearts. What are the gaps, and what needs to be developed to ensure you create pathways for people of all ages and backgrounds? This is where the Discipleship Assessment Tool can be really helpful to see where the gaps are and what needs to be focused upon in this season.

It can be good to see the discipleship pathway as a map that highlights clear steps for progression and emphasises both spiritual maturity and increased engagement. Ensure that each step is considered essential for all church members, including non-believers who attend and new converts who may not be familiar with church language or practices.

The discipleship pathway should consist of at least four steps, each offering opportunities for individuals to cultivate growth in the defined discipleship values.

The pathway needs to include the following:

HEAD - Where people are growing in understanding of the Christian faith.

HEART - Where people's hearts can be aligned with God and be broken for the same things as His. This also includes growing and living our lives with clean and sinless hearts.

HANDS - Where people get to try out and do the things they see Jesus doing in the Gospels and use the gifts they are given for the work of his kingdom.

| | HEAD | HEART | HANDS |
|------------------------------------|------|-------|-------|
| Disbelief to Belief | | | |
| Belief to Surrender | | | |
| Surrender to Walking and Emulation | | | |
| Emulation to Multiplication | | | |
| Multiplication to Movement | | | |

3. Align your discipleship pathway with your core ministries and streamline your work.

Ask:

Is there anything we are doing that is taking a lot of our attention but isn't helping people grow as disciples? Should this work be stopped and changed so that it effectively fits the mission?

It is possible to be doing a lot but at the same time doing very little to take people on their discipleship pathway. We must ensure our core church activities and ministries are helping people and equipping them for their pathways. This means we must look at what we do and ask if it fulfils the goal.

To align your Discipleship pathway with core church ministry, focus on essential elements. For instance:

1. Prioritise community connection: Develop a strong integration team to foster hospitality and relationships. Collaborate with small group ministries for new people to find connection.

2. Emphasise growth: Offer a first steps class or course to nurture new disciples' spiritual journeys.

3. Value volunteering: Introduce individuals to relevant "inwards facing ministries" based on their passions, gifts, and life season. Simplify communication between interested individuals and ministries.

4. Champion deployment: Extend a similar process to engage individuals with "outward-facing ministries" in the church.

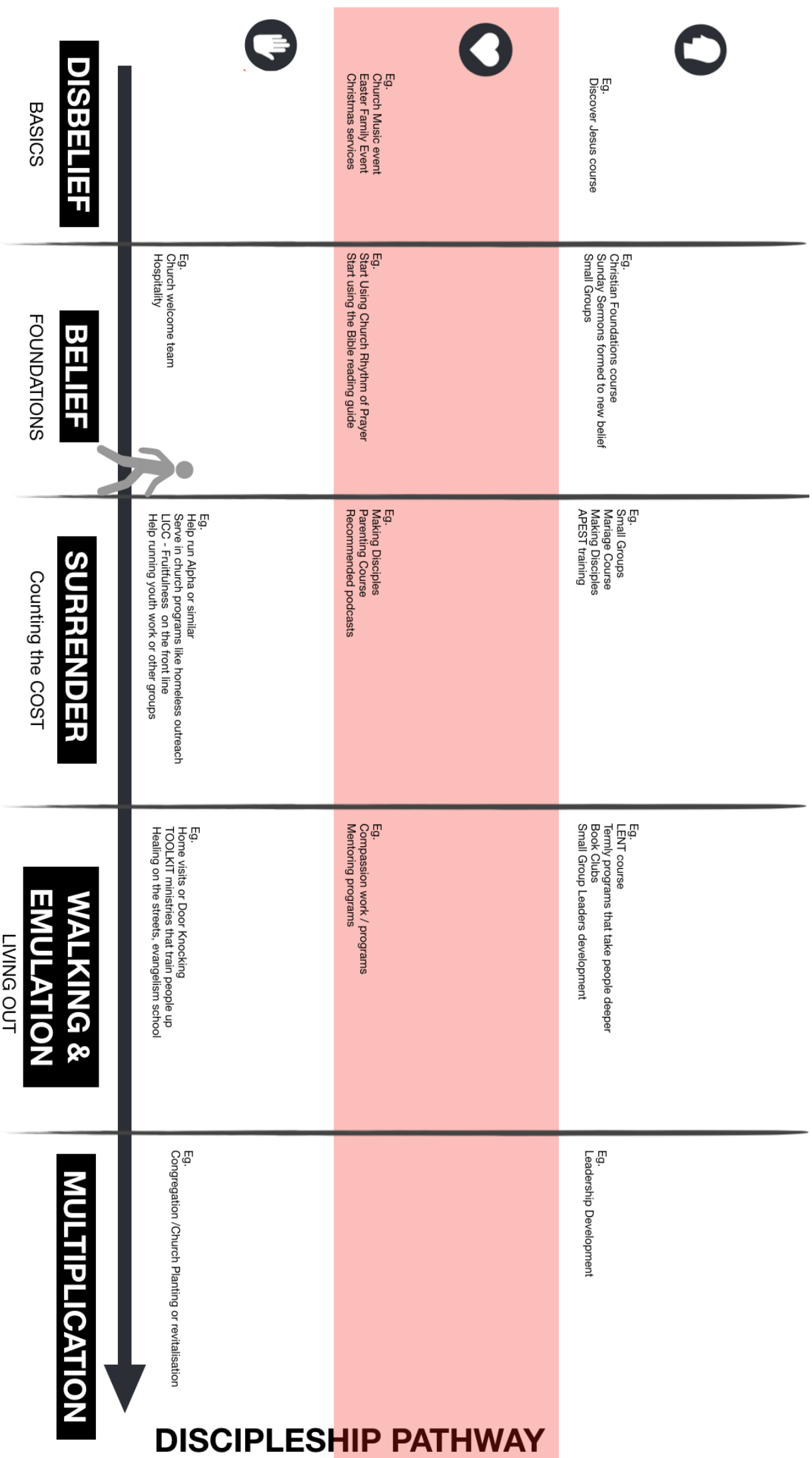
5. Shift the focus from attracting people to shaping people according to the vision. Rather than organising events solely based on what we think will draw a crowd (e.g., Sunday morning worship style and sermon), we intentionally design events that align with our convictions and help make disciples.

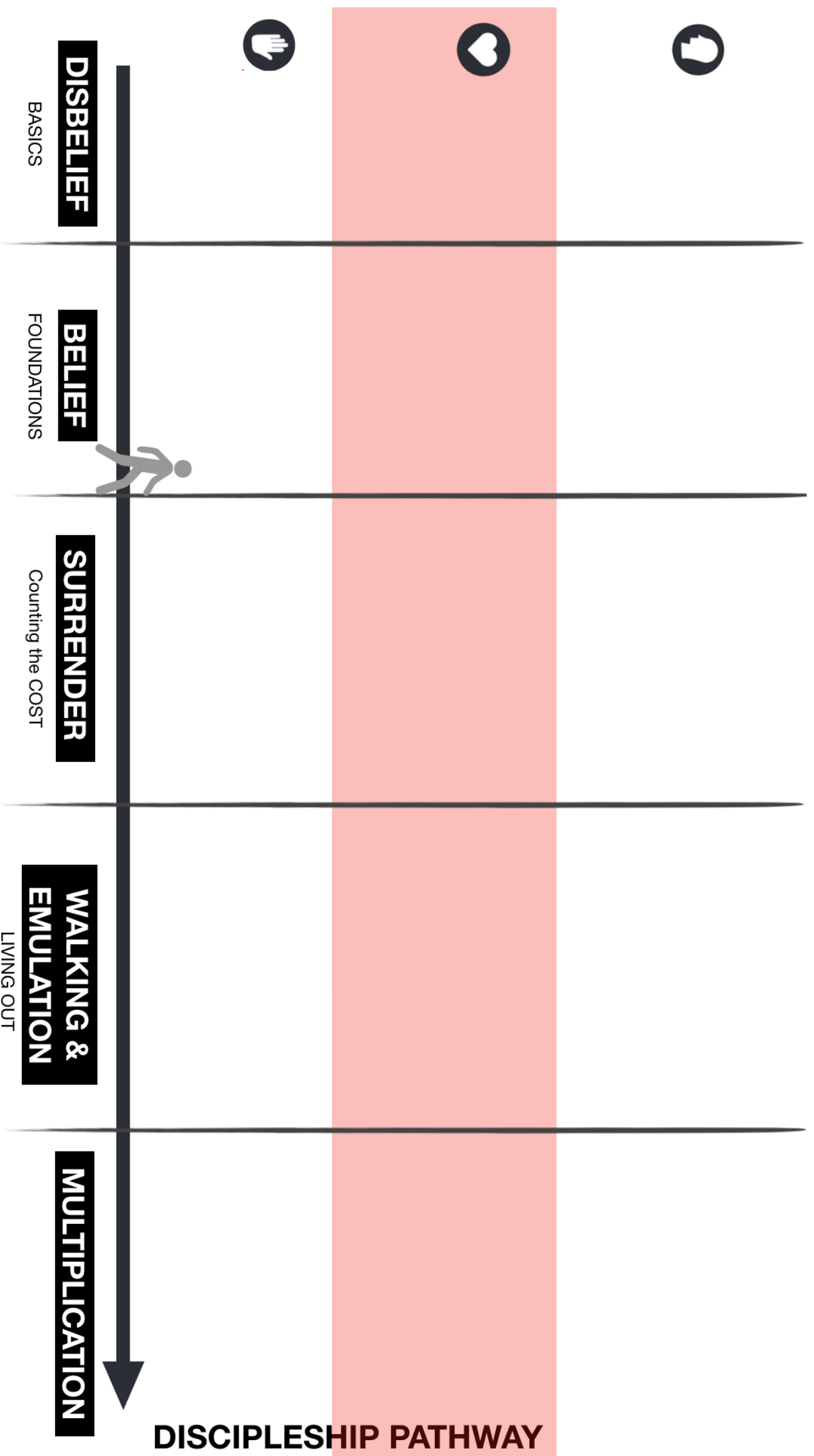
Shift from focusing on attendance to focusing on engagement. In today's fast-paced world, traditional evening meetings may not attract a large turnout. People's lives have become demanding and hectic. Instead of relying solely on Sunday evening prayer meetings for spiritual growth, consider embracing technology and leveraging positive cultural trends. Why not host prayer meetings over Zoom or maintain a prayer list on Facebook? This approach will likely generate higher engagement, which is a more meaningful indicator of discipleship than mere attendance.

Consider the following key questions when implementing your discipleship pathway:

1. Is the first step simple, clear, and easily accessible to unchurched individuals or new believers? Avoid overwhelming them right from the start.
2. Are you effectively promoting and communicating the pathway in a clear, accessible, and engaging manner? Ensure your targeted audience understands the language and style of your communications.
3. How can people discover the first step if they don't read your literature or follow your social media channels? Explore alternative ways to make the pathway known.
4. Are the connections between each step in your process strong and efficient? Streamline the transitions to avoid gaps or confusion.
5. How do you prevent individuals from "falling through the cracks" after completing each step? Implement strategies to maintain their engagement and progress.
6. What methods can you use to track and measure participation in each step? Establish mechanisms to monitor progress (Like the Discipleship Assessment Tool) and identify areas for improvement. This isn't about being big brother but it is about encouraging growth. This needs to be sensitively done and appropriate for your context.
7. How do you follow up with individuals who may have dropped out along the pathway? Develop a system to re-engage and support those who have discontinued their journey.
8. How will you gather feedback from individuals experiencing each stage of the discipleship path? Create opportunities for them to share their thoughts and insights to enhance the pathway's effectiveness.

On the following page is an example of a discipleship pathway worksheet for church elders or strategic planners to work through. Take time to address what would fall into each box. Do you have something in each to take disciples through a pathway.





DISCIPLESHIP PATHWAY

DISBELIEF

BASICS

BELIEF

FOUNDATIONS

SURRENDER

Counting the COST

WALKING & EMULATION

LIVING OUT

MULTIPLICATION

**MAKING
DISCIPLES**