PARADIGMS, NOT PATHWAYS

Seeing differently matters more than doing something new.

WHERE ARE WE TAKING PEOPLE?

Pathways have become increasingly prominent in the language of the Church. Discipleship pathways. Leadership pathways. Spiritual growth pathways. Pathways designed to help people connect, grow, serve, and take their next steps in following Jesus.

The language is appealing. Pathways suggest direction, intentionality, and progress. They give us a way to imagine how someone might move from where they are to where we hope they'll be. But there's a question that deserves more attention.

What if our pathways are taking people exactly where we designed them to go, but we've never stopped to ask whether that's where Jesus is leading them?

Every pathway begins with assumptions. Assumptions about where people are, what they need, how they grow, and what their lives should eventually look like. Those assumptions shape the destinations we choose, the steps we establish, and the outcomes we measure.

And that's where paradigms enter the picture. A paradigm is the underlying way we understand reality. It influences what we notice, what we overlook, what we consider possible, and what we expect to happen. Our paradigms shape our pathways long before anyone takes the first step.

We can spend years refining the journey without ever questioning the destination.

LIFE DOESN'T FOLLOW A STRAIGHT LINE

Pathways tend to be linear. But life isn't. We identify starting points, establish milestones, and imagine a sequence of steps that will move people toward spiritual maturity. But people don't experience life in neatly arranged stages.

Their stories unfold through unexpected friendships, difficult questions, personal crises, ordinary conversations, and moments nobody could have anticipated. Their journeys with Jesus include doubts, discoveries, setbacks, surprises, and seasons that refuse to fit into predetermined categories.

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Over the past fifteen years, Lucia and I have watched this unfold in the lives of Disney Cast Members from around the world. No two stories have followed the same route.

Some have encountered Jesus through conversations around our dinner table. Others through friendships, unexpected circumstances, or questions that surfaced months or even years after we first met. Some have taken steps toward Jesus that we never anticipated. Others are still exploring, questioning, and discovering. And many of those discoveries have happened in ways we could never have designed in advance.

We've become remarkably good at designing pathways for people whose lives refuse to follow straight lines.

What happens when someone's questions don't match the next step we've prepared for them? When their circumstances interrupt the sequence? When Jesus seems to be doing something that doesn't fit our expectations? Do we adjust our understanding of what's happening, or do we keep trying to move them toward the destination we've already chosen?

That's where the difference between a pathway and a paradigm becomes significant. A pathway tells us where we expect someone to go. A paradigm shapes what we're capable of recognizing along the way.

THE ASSUMPTIONS WE INHERIT

Most of our paradigms weren't consciously chosen. We inherited them. They came through the churches that shaped us, the leaders who influenced us, the traditions we grew up with, the education we received, and the experiences that formed our understanding of what following Jesus should look like.

Over time, those assumptions become so familiar that we stop recognizing them as assumptions. We begin treating our understanding of discipleship, spiritual growth, leadership, and mission as though it were the only way to understand them. And eventually, those assumptions begin determining what we consider successful.

If our paradigm assumes that spiritual maturity is primarily demonstrated through increased involvement in church activities, we'll naturally design pathways that lead toward greater involvement. If our paradigm assumes that the primary goal of outreach is bringing people into our churches, we'll design pathways that move people in that direction.

And when those pathways accomplish what we designed them to accomplish, we celebrate their success. But have we stopped to question the assumptions that determined those destinations in the first place?

It's possible to develop an effective pathway that faithfully delivers people to a destination we've never seriously questioned. A successful pathway doesn't necessarily mean we're seeing the whole picture.

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WHEN JESUS CHALLENGES THE DESTINATION

Jesus frequently challenged people's assumptions about God, His Kingdom, and what it meant to follow Him. He announced that the Kingdom of God had come near. He described the harvest as plentiful. He ate with people others avoided, welcomed those others dismissed, and revealed God's activity in places religious people weren't expecting to find it.

His disciples often struggled to understand what He was doing because His actions didn't fit their expectations. Consider Peter's encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10.

Peter had inherited deeply held assumptions about who belonged among God's people and how he should relate to Gentiles. Then God interrupted those assumptions. Through a vision, an unexpected invitation, and an encounter with a Gentile household, Peter began recognizing something he hadn't previously understood.

God was already at work beyond the boundaries Peter had assumed.

Peter wasn't given a new sequence of steps for reaching Gentiles. He was confronted with a reality that required him to reconsider how he understood God's work. And when the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his household, Peter had to respond to what God was actually doing rather than what he had previously expected.

He began seeing differently. And that changed how he lived.

What if we approached discipleship, leadership, and mission with that same willingness to have our assumptions challenged? What if we became more interested in recognizing where Jesus is already leading people than in determining where we think they should go?

START WITH THE PEOPLE, NOT THE PATHWAY

Imagine meeting someone for the first time and immediately handing them a map. You explain the destination, identify the milestones, and describe the steps they'll need to take.

But you haven't asked where they've been, what they're carrying, what they're searching for, or where they're hoping to go. You haven't even listened to their story. Yet you've already decided on their destination.

Something similar can happen when our pathways become the starting point for relationships. We begin with a destination in mind, and then attempt to understand people in relation to that destination.

Jesus often began somewhere else. He noticed people. He asked questions. He listened. He entered their homes, shared meals, and responded to circumstances that unfolded in front of Him.

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His encounters with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Zacchaeus, and the rich young ruler were remarkably different. Different people. Different questions. Different conversations. Different invitations.

Jesus wasn't trying to fit each person into an identical sequence of experiences. He met them where they were and invited them to respond to Him.

That challenges something fundamental about how we approach the people around us. What if our first responsibility isn't to determine someone's next step, but to discover what Jesus is already doing in their life? What if we approached every relationship with curiosity rather than a predetermined outcome? What might we discover that our pathways would never have anticipated?

A DIFFERENT STARTING PLACE

This is one of the convictions behind Harvest Forward. Harvest Forward is a paradigm, not a pathway.

It begins with two realities Jesus revealed: His Kingdom is near, and His harvest is plentiful. Those realities invite us to begin somewhere different.

Instead of starting with a destination we've already determined, we begin by exploring the people, places, relationships, and opportunities Jesus has placed before us. We look closely. Listen deeply. Learn humbly.

We approach the harvest with Holy Curiosity, paying attention to the clues, questions, tensions, and possibilities emerging in people's everyday lives. And as we begin seeing differently, we begin living differently.

We express the Kingdom through genuine friendships, ordinary conversations, hospitality, generosity, and small, intentional steps of faith. We experiment with possibilities as they emerge, learning from what happens and adjusting as the Spirit leads.

Explore. Express. Experiment. Not stages along a predetermined pathway, but postures that shape how we see, respond, and move forward.

We don't need to know in advance where every conversation will lead or what every relationship will become. We can trust Jesus with what comes next.

THE POSSIBILITY WE HAVEN'T CONSIDERED

There's something wonderfully freeing about realizing we don't have to determine every destination before taking the first step. We can enter relationships without knowing where they'll

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lead. We can ask questions without already knowing the answers. We can respond to unexpected opportunities without having to fit them into an established sequence.

And we can remain open to the possibility that Jesus may be doing something we haven't yet learned to recognize.

Imagine what might happen if more followers of Jesus began questioning the assumptions shaping their understanding of discipleship, leadership, mission, and the Church itself. What new possibilities might emerge? What relationships might deepen? What expressions of the Kingdom might become visible in places we've overlooked?

The Kingdom is near. The harvest is plentiful. And Jesus is already at work in the lives of people whose stories are still unfolding.

The question isn't simply whether we've designed a pathway that will take them somewhere. It's whether we're seeing clearly enough to recognize where Jesus is already leading them.

And that begins with a different question.

Jesus, what am I not seeing?

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