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Measuring Spiritual Growth

Using objectives and doorposts

Alan Danielson | posted February 13, 2012



Note: This article is excerpted from our training theme [Empowering Group Members](#).

There's an old saying in business: "Measured performance is improved performance." It also appears to be true of ministry. Absolutely nothing in my 20-plus years of church experience has ever proven this statement wrong. In church we measure what is important to us. Even churches who don't measure attendance measure the weekly offering! It comes down to this: when we want to improve something, we measure it. Then we can track improvement and know when we've reached our goals. Measurable goals are simple when tracking tangible things like attendance and offerings, but how do we effectively measure spiritual growth?

For decades churches have tried to measure the spiritual growth of parishioners by having people complete courses, studies, classes, and curricula. As such, we've helped people acquire certificates, degrees, and accolades. Why have we done this? Because processes and participation are easy to measure. And these numbers allow us to monitor progress and tell us if people are on the right trajectory. Right?

Sadly, we just don't see enough evidence that this approach has really produced disciples. The problem is that curricula and classes don't necessarily produce disciples; rather, they produce knowledge. While disciples should continue to grow in knowledge, growth in knowledge does not mean the person is a disciple. The Pharisees are all the proof we need. So, tracking discipleship by class participation and completion is just not enough.

Furthermore, this approach to discipleship has produced a lot of church elitism. By accumulating accolades, we've given people the sense that they've arrived, something no disciple should feel. Once people have completed the outlined courses and received the certificates, it's easy for them to feel like they're "done." But sanctification isn't complete until we arrive in heaven, so our earthly efforts at discipleship should never make people feel like they've arrived. This was another problem with the Pharisees.

In reaction to this, many of us in church leadership tried something different. Rather than tracking class participation, we set up ongoing small groups. Then we started tracking the number of groups and participants. Since tracking knowledge didn't work, we began tracking relationships. We felt that disciples were being made when people "stuck" to a group.

This approach has failed to produce consistent, ongoing life-change on a large scale, though. And perhaps we were silly to believe it could. If Christian relationships were truly enough to produce disciples, why didn't it work for Judas? He had a three-year, face-to-face relationship with Jesus, yet Judas still fell away. Relationships just aren't enough. If they were, everyone who has been connected to church for a while would be extremely Christ-like. But we've all known people who go to church regularly yet are enormously rude,

selfish, negative, bitter, and just plain mean. Relationships with other Christians are certainly a good thing, and they definitely contribute to discipleship, but measuring relationships still misses the mark.

So what should we measure? How do we, as church leaders, create pathways that lead people to genuine life-change without puffing them up, burning them out, and aiming them in the wrong direction? I'll answer this question by focusing on two types of measurables: objectives and doorposts.

Objectives

When I say "objectives" I mean the "front end" of spiritual development. Objectives are easy-to-measure goals that embody what we would like people to aim for and accomplish. Objectives give us an idea of where disciples are going. The measurables I addressed earlier, like group and class attendance, certainly fit under the umbrella of objectives. When determining what objectives you would like to measure, be sure to incorporate the following principles.

Spiritual growth objectives should be holistic. Spiritual growth is so much more than church attendance, group attendance, and Bible study. Spiritual growth goals should encompass the life of a disciple rather than just one or two aspects of a disciple's life. For example, *Financial Peace University* (FPU) is a great discipleship tool. FPU, by Dave Ramsey, is a class that teaches biblical personal finance. Through Ramsey's teachings we can measure the number of people in our church who are learning how to conquer debt, live on a budget, plan for the future, and become generous givers. However, if FPU were our only discipleship tool, it would not be enough. We must create discipleship plans that address *many* aspects of people's lives.

Craig Groeschel, the senior pastor of Edmond, Oklahoma's LifeChurch.tv wrote a book called *Chazown*. In it he breaks down discipleship into five key areas: physical life, relationships with people, relationship with God, work life, and financial life. I love the way pastor Groeschel thinks about spiritual growth: it's all-encompassing. You can't grow to wholeness in Christ by being a good steward yet still being a negative, bitter, complainer or by being a good friend yet a lazy employee. Holistic thinking in spiritual growth is key.

Small-group leaders should continually remind group members that becoming like Christ is an all-encompassing endeavor. A great way to do this is to embrace a more holistic approach to group life. Don't just study the Bible and pray together. These are essential practices, but they don't cover other aspects of spiritual growth. Do mission projects together. Eat healthy foods together. Exercise together. Play together. Spend time with one another's families. Hold one another financially accountable. This may sound like a lot, but it's really not. Don't try to do it all in a month, but plan to do these things together over the long haul. The point here is simple: people learn best by doing. *Do* spiritual growth together rather than just talking and praying about it.

Spiritual growth objectives should be realistic. The goals you set for people should fit into real life. To help those you lead establish realistic objectives, teach people how to weave their spiritual growth objectives into their daily lives so the objectives aren't perceived as a burden. You may also need to ask them to replace other habits or activities with the new objectives. We often burn people out spiritually by heaping more and more on them. Instead, we should only ask people to add on if they subtract something.

Small-group leaders can help members create realistic spiritual growth goals by making "stop doing lists." Ask group members what growth goals they'd like to accomplish. Then challenge them to look at their lives and decide what they need to stop doing in order to make room for their goals. Group leaders can best lead this activity by creating their own stop doing lists and openly sharing them. Group leaders also should be willing to have the group hold them accountable.

Spiritual growth objectives should be systematic. I heard Andy Stanley say, "Systems create behaviors," and that statement has stuck with me. If I want to lead people to adopt certain behaviors, I must create systems that lead them to those behaviors. For example, asking a disciple to read the entire Bible in a year is a nice goal. However, it's an objective that is doomed to fail without a system of support. Giving the same person a version of *The One Year Bible* or pointing them to YouVersion.com and asking them to read the Bible in a year gives them the goal and the system to achieve it.

You could also hold one another accountable to your goals by checking in about your goals each week at your meetings and sending reminder e-mails or texts throughout the week. For example, if your group decides they all want to read the Bible every day for 40 days, send the entire group a text at 7:00 a.m. each day for the 40 days.

It's likely that your group members will have different spiritual growth goals, so teach them to leverage their own systems. Remind group members that their smart phones and computers can be programmed with reminders for pretty much everything. The point here is to get people thinking not only about behaviors but also about systems that motivate behaviors.

The bottom line is this: you measure what you think is important, so create systems to promote and increase those measurements. One of the greatest ways you can create these systems is leveraging what I call "doorposts."

Doorposts

Objectives represent the "front end" of spiritual development. Doorposts, on the other hand, represent the hindsight of spiritual development. They are the points we refer back to in order to tell others, and remind ourselves, how God has changed us.

The term "doorposts" comes from the Hebrew word *mezuzah*. In [Deuteronomy 6:9](#) God commanded Israel to attach his commands to the doorposts of their homes. The point of hanging the commands on the doorposts was to remind God's people of what he had done for them and what he expected of them. In today's busy world, we need reminders like this more than ever.

A doorpost is different from an objective because an objective has a definitive end. A few years ago I reached a milestone when I finished a marathon. By training for the marathon I lost a lot of weight and was in the best shape of my life. The marathon was an objective: an achievable goal. Once it was achieved, I was done.

A mezuzah or doorpost is not something that is achievable; rather, it is something that reminds us of a previous achievement. Like a literal doorpost in your home, this figurative doorpost is something you encounter every day that regularly reminds you of what was while simultaneously inspiring you with what could be.

Right now the certificate stating that I finished the marathon and a photo of my thinner self are tucked away in a drawer. They aren't doing me much good there. But if I were to frame the certificate and photo and hang it in my office, they would serve as a powerful and motivating doorpost. An even better motivator would be getting an identical empty frame and hanging it next to the first one. The first frame would remind me of what was, while the second would remind me of what can be.

What if our lives were full of spiritual doorposts? How might the people you lead be different if they were surrounded by reminders of previous spiritual growth achievements while simultaneously being inspired to go even further? Here are some principles that will help you create effective doorposts for your spiritual growth goals.

Spiritual growth doorposts should be visible. Spiritual growth doorposts do not belong in a box, drawer, file cabinet, or computer spreadsheet; they belong out in the open where they can be seen. At our church, we ask families to complete a course called Family ID. In it, families write their family vision or mission statement, identify their core values, and create plans to live them out. After going through the course, we create doorposts by having those families put their handprints on canvases that are hung in our building so families are reminded of their unique Family IDs every time they walk into the building.

Spiritual growth doorposts should be emotional. By this I mean that doorposts should evoke an emotional response. When people complete *Financial Peace University* at our church, we put their chopped up credit cards in jars that we display in the lobby. When they see the jars, they are emotionally reminded of how good it felt to cut up the cards. Additionally, they are continually reminded that they don't ever want to go back to the world of financial bondage.

Spiritual growth doorposts should be inspiring. This is slightly different than the previous principle in that doorposts should inspire those who have not yet completed the spiritual growth objectives. When people who haven't gone through Family ID see the handprints in our building and read the short explanation hanging next to the canvases, they are inspired to go through Family ID themselves.

Spiritual growth doorposts should tell stories. We'll occasionally feature a video in church about a person or family who has reached a spiritual growth objective. This video serves as a doorpost because it is visible, it evokes emotion, and it inspires. Most importantly, though, the video tells a story. Human beings process and assimilate information best through stories. In this sense, the entire Bible is one big doorpost. It tells stories of faith, triumph, failure, hope, growth, and love. These stories motivate us to grow in our faith. Whatever doorposts you decide to implement in your church, be sure to tell stories about them.

Final, and Most Important, Thoughts

Leveraging objectives and doorposts will help you move people in the right direction spiritually. The more you consider and implement the principles mentioned above, the more effective your discipleship methods will be. However, no matter what spiritual growth plans you put into place, never forget the following four things.

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is responsible for drawing people to faith in Christ. The same Holy Spirit is also responsible for drawing people closer to Christ after they've become Christians. Church leaders sometimes feel like we are responsible for discipleship. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are not responsible for discipleship; the Holy Spirit is. At most, we are responsible for fostering environments and opportunities for the Holy Spirit to work. Don't ever think that by creating objectives and doorposts your people will automatically become spiritually mature believers. Objectives and doorposts are environmental tools for the Holy Spirit.

The Slow Cooker Principle

In our fast paced, high tech culture we desire microwavable spiritual growth. Growing to be like Jesus is not a microwaveable process though; it's a life-long process. Remember, discipleship is like a slow cooker, not a microwave. It takes time for people to mature spiritually. Don't ever think that your spiritual growth objectives and doorposts will quickly create disciples. They won't. Over time, however, in conjunction with the Spirit's work, they will help facilitate powerful and lasting change.

Measure the Right Things

Keep track of your objectives, but more importantly, measure your doorposts. The more doorposts you have on display, the more people will be inspired to grow.

Think Before You Toss

While you have learned some new ideas about measuring spiritual growth, don't just take your current systems and throw them out. Consider how your current systems can be an effective part of measuring life-change. Just because a current system hasn't yet given you the results you want doesn't mean it's intrinsically bad. Pray about how your church can best implement objectives and doorposts—even within your current systems.

—Alan Danielson is the Senior Pastor of New Life Bible Church in Norman, Oklahoma. Alan is a popular conference speaker and consults regularly with ministries and leaders on topics relating to small groups and leadership. Copyright 2012 Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. What do you normally measure in your group? Do you think this is good or bad?
2. Do you help your group members make holistic, achievable objectives? Why or why not?
3. What kinds of things can serve as doorposts for your small group achievements? How can you encourage group members to create their own doorposts?