

## Fall Programming

by Tim Moore

During the next two weeks churches will begin fall programming. For some congregations this means Sunday school will start up again after a summer break. In others Wednesday night activities will include music classes, children's programming, dinner and adult studies. Choir practices, small groups, book clubs, English as a Second Language classes, are all coming to congregations somewhere.

Whether your congregation has a full slate lined up, or you are preparing to open your whole children's department in a single classroom, such programming is a vestige of 20th-century American Christianity—and I'm not just talking about the bright colored construction paper stapled to a bulletin board.

Several years ago another pastor and I were talking about our congregations. He was lamenting the fact that many of his families were skipping out on Wednesday night programming for their kids' soccer practices. In his mind this represented a problem with his church members—their faith was suspect, their commitment lacking.

I thought something was lacking, but it wasn't the commitment of church members. What was lacking was a practice of stewardship—evaluating what was being done by the congregation's values and mission. People choose one thing over another because it provides more value or meaning. When people are choosing soccer practice over church programming it's past time to practice stewardship.

Spiritual formation, or theological education, in churches still offers meaningful ministry when it is intentionally planned for the needs of its congregation. Does your congregation value the relationships found in the church? Then, don't let fellowship be a by-product of your programming.

Create meaningful ways to cultivate new friendships and deepen older relationships. Does your congregation value the opportunity to think theologically about 21st-century life? Then, make time to plan ways to challenge them with engaging topics of theological relevance. Does your congregation hunger to make a difference in your community? Then creatively plan ways to interact with the community. Going out and doing might be more formative than sitting in and talking.

Nurturing spiritual formation through church programming is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Ask what value, what purpose, what meaning does the programming your church will be starting up this fall bring to your congregation? If that's not a question you can answer right away, perhaps it is worth pondering the next three months.

After Labor Day volunteers will be preparing to teach classes, lead groups, organize outings and all sorts of other things on church calendars. Practicing a little stewardship will help make the best use of their time.

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