

{PROFILE}

HISPANIC COMPASSION MINISTRIES

Reclaiming Men's Lives in Riverside

PATH OF LIFE

By Edward R. Davis and Amy L. Sherman



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Church Name:

Path of Life

Location:

Riverside, California

Size: 150

Compassion Ministry:

Path of Life Transitional Home

Year Started: 2000

Estimated Yearly Budget: \$68,400

Paid Staff: 1

Volunteer Staff: 6

Brief Description

Path of Life Transitional Home provides formerly incarcerated men, and men struggling with drug and alcohol addiction, with a 12-month, structured, residential program that helps them to become whole and to successfully reintegrate into society. The home currently serves 28 to 30 men.



GENESIS

Pastor Raúl Díaz dreamed of opening a transitional home for struggling men from the first days of his ministry at Path of Life Church. A former drug abuser himself, he knew all too well the desolation and heartache brought on by drugs. In 1977, however, through his participation in a residential rehabilitation program, God grabbed hold of his life and transformed it. Having been healed by God, the course of his life was set. From that point on, he would be an instrument of God's healing in the lives of other men. From 1985 to 1992, Diaz served as the pastor of a large Pentecostal church in Amsterdam. The church ran both a men's home and a women's home for recovering addicts. Upon returning to the United States, Raul sought to plant a church that would embrace his vision of a holistic ministry to "down and out" men.

Raul won the support of two congregation members, but building a more general consensus within the church took time. Parishioners were unfamiliar with this sort of ministry. Eventually, though, through his preaching Raul was able to bring the congregation to a point of consensus that God was calling them to sponsor a transitional home. Although at the time the church had neither the money nor the finances to begin such a venture, Diaz felt a strong sense from God that they needed to step out in faith.

Diaz actually located the facility before finding a director for the home. Working with a Christian realtor, he found a building that was large enough to house up to thirty men and far enough away from the city to avoid its distractions.

Raul's next step was to find a director who could oversee the home. Not knowing how to proceed, like many men of God before him, he sought solitude in the desert. He hoped that there, far from distractions, he might better hear God's still small voice. Unknown to him at that time, obeying a similar prompting, Juan Salinas came to the same retreat center seeking God's direction for his life. The two men shared much in common. Like Raul, Juan was a former addict who had seen his life turned around through a Christian rehabilitation

program. Like Raul, Juan had had experience in the past overseeing such homes. And like Raul, Juan had an unshakeable yearning to be used by God to reach hurting men. Their meeting in the fall of 1999 was clearly providential. Raul was already familiar with one of the homes where Juan had served as director and felt an immediate bond with him. Several weeks later, Raul contacted Juan and asked him what he was currently making as a construction worker. He then offered to have the church match that salary if Juan would come and serve as director for the home they were beginning.



Program participant loading food from food pantry.

The Path of Life Transitional Home accepted its first man into the program in April, 2000. Juan and his wife, Eveline, concentrated on ministering to these men. Meanwhile, Pastor

Path of Life’s program is shaped around three goals: healing and restoration, the development of life skills and a Biblical philosophy of life, and work training.

Raul sought to build support in the community for the program. He shared his vision with as many people as he could—his congressman, the county supervisor, officials from HUD, and the mayor. Though initially skeptical, many of these individuals were eventually won over as the program matured and graduated men exhibiting significant growth. Now roughly 40 percent of the men in the program are referred by the courts or parole board.



PROGRAM

SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES

Men participating in the program at the Path of Life Transitional Home live in community in a structured environment. They pray together every morning for an hour. Each is responsible for completing a daily chore before breakfast (such as vacuuming or washing dishes). The men take their meals together and spend the day working in jobs, community service, or in the group home. They then meet most evenings from 7:00 p.m. to 7:45 p.m. for study. Afterwards, they “hang out” together in the house, lifting weights, talking over the day, playing pool, and so forth.

The men follow a strict set of guidelines regulating their daily lives and the ways they interact with one another. Privileges such as use of the phone, or “passes” to see family, are given or taken away according to a man’s willingness to abide by these rules. Minor offenses include: inability to keep one’s room clean, lack of personal hygiene, laziness on a work crew, and being late to classes or program functions. Major offenses include behavior such as drinking or using drugs, stealing, consistently displaying a negative attitude, smoking, or threatening other students. Major offenses can result in expulsion from the program.

Men are given increasing levels of responsibility as they “stay straight” and show positive signs of growth spiritually, emotionally, and relationally. After six months, residents are eligible to become “overseers.” Overseers are crucial to the success and proper functioning of the Home. They are the ones who directly supervise the men. They lead them in devotions, oversee the study hall and worksites, and mediate minor issues that arise among the men. Out of 28 men currently enrolled in the program, four are currently overseers. Three additional men are presently being groomed for the position. Overseers meet regularly with House Director Juan every two weeks as a group, and more frequently if the need arises.

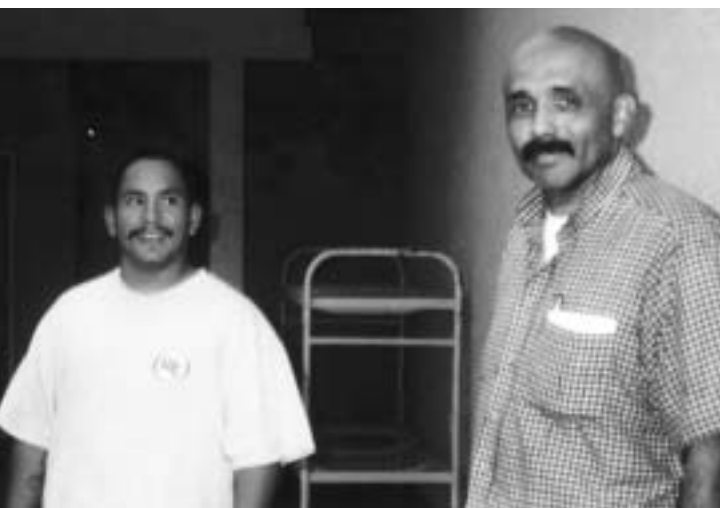
They also meet with him individually at least two times a month.

STAFFING

► **Pastor:** Raúl Díaz, pastor of Path of Life Church, provides support and oversight for Juan Salinas, the House Director. He works hard in the community to raise the level of awareness among public officials of the group home and its mission. Raul meets with Juan twice per week, to review decisions, offer guidance, and discuss ministry implementation and future plans.

► **House Director:** Juan Salinas provides general oversight of the Transitional Home. He and his wife, Eveline, live upstairs at the Path of Life Home in a two-bedroom apartment. Among other things, he supervises the overseers, ensures that the men are complying

with the rules, counsels men individually when needed, helps to teach various classes, and spends time networking in the community trying to form relationships with local businesses. He sees his role primarily as being that of a father to the men residing at the Home.



Director Juan Salinas (right) with unidentified student.

T E S T I M O N Y

It is difficult to imagine that the polite, soft-spoken man once headed a notorious gang and was famous for his violent temper. Yet as Path of Life participant David himself admits, “I came in here with a lot of anger...argumentative, wanting to fight. I was prejudiced against everybody—even my own race. I hated everybody.”

David is a native son of Casa Blanca, one of Riverside’s worst neighborhoods. He got involved with the wrong crowd at age ten, following in his older, gang-banging brother’s footsteps. By thirteen, David was doing and selling drugs; eventually, he became hooked on heroin. For the next twenty years, he cycled in and out of prison.

Ten months ago, his parole officer called him in after an infraction. The officer, a Christian, offered David a choice: go back to prison or enroll in Path of Life’s program. “I had to give up,” David quietly explains. “I was out there getting high, partying, but I wasn’t happy.” He decided to enroll in the program.

In contrast with another program he’d tried years before, Path of Life has more rules, more structure—things David realizes he needs. He says he appreciates the depth of teaching at the Home, and the morning times of group prayer and worship. It gives him confidence, he reports. “The Bible studies are encouraging. I know I’m here for a purpose,” David says. “We can’t do it by ourselves.”

Although he has a long way to go, David is encouraged by the change he’s seen in himself, a change that others have remarked on as well. As he puts it, “People who knew me before, I know they see a difference in the way I carry myself...This is a real good program. I’ve seen a lot of guys come in here and change...I’m one of them.”



David says the Path of Life program has helped him overcome his anger and violent temper.





MISSION

Path of Life's program is shaped around three main goals: healing and restoration, the development of life skills and a Biblical philosophy of life, and work training.

Healing and Restoration: The program attempts to bring to light and address the root causes of the particular issue or issues with which a man may be struggling and to lead him in experiencing a measure of healing. Resources that have proved helpful for this process are the books *The Bondage Breaker* by Neil Anderson and *Renewing the Mind* by Casey Treat.

Life Skills and Philosophy of Life: The program seeks to teach the men a Biblical philosophy of life as well as practical life skills. A key resource for this process has been the Bible study *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby. Four nights and three mornings a week, the men gather in a large central room for classes on a variety of topics related to Christian discipleship. The men also are required to spend some part of every day outside of class in quiet study.

Work Training: The program helps participants to develop marketable skills, gain job experience, and develop a work ethic, so they can successfully reenter society. This is done primarily through partnering with local businesses. A local pastor, who has a contractor's license and does remodeling on the side, currently employs eight of the men, providing them with important on-the-job training. Men from the program also work with a local sign painter and a landscaper. Those who, for whatever reason, are unable to obtain a paying job, work at the men's home and perform volunteer service. Such community service allows the men to give back to the community as well as to develop a work ethic. For example, a church from Los Angeles recently asked the men to help set up an AIDS walk-a-thon.



PHILOSOPHY

Raul and Juan designed the program at Path of Life based on their own personal experiences and the lessons they had learned from other effective models. Juan distills the "non-negotiables" of success down to four key areas. Prayer is first: the men are asked to spend one hour a day praying. As Juan puts it, "Prayer is what makes the home flow." Respect for the House Director is also key. Participants in the program must show a proper respect for the house director. "If they don't respect (the director)," Juan has found, "they'll leave any way, sooner or later." The third principle is expecting change in the men. Raul and Juan are convinced that a man cannot participate in the program with no discernible change. Every man must come to a point of decision and make a genuine effort to change. If Juan senses an unwillingness to change on the part of a participant, he begins to spend time individually with the man to find out what's going on. If the individual is unresponsive to Juan and continues to exhibit a hard heart, he will be asked to leave the program. If there has been growth, the man may candidate for the position of overseer. Finally, rules are critical. Although acknowledging the need to approach

the men as individuals and each situation on a case-by-case basis, Juan emphasized the need to have rules for the group home, in order to make life in community work.



Jesse (left) at worksite with unidentified program participant.



KEY RESOURCES

From their own experience at Path of Life and other programs in which they have been involved, the ministry leaders highlight several essential resources needed to launch a successful program of this type:

<1> Experienced Staff. Undoubtedly, one of Path of Life's greatest strengths is the wealth of personal and professional experience key leaders Raúl Díaz and Juan Salinas bring to the ministry. Raúl's experience as a participant in a residential program, and as director of several homes, meant he had many concrete ideas of how to accomplish this kind of ministry. And he knew exactly what he was looking for in a House Director. Juan Salinas came with prior experience as a Director and a strong sense of calling to this sort of outreach.

<2> Facility. Raul teamed up with a Christian realtor who helped the church to find a building that would be appropriate as a group home. God worked in an amazing way in the story of the church's acquisition of this property. The owners wanted to sell, not rent. The church had no money to offer as a down payment. Nonetheless, Path of Life was able to secure the building on a lease option. Eventually, they negotiated a very reasonable selling price since the building needed considerable renovations. Church members and home residents spent the next two years gradually making the improvements themselves. Everything else the ministry has needed for the home—furnishings, computers, and household supplies—has been donated.

In many programs, men are allowed little if any contact with their families. By contrast, Path of Life allows the men a fair degree of interaction with their families.

<3> A Program Support Team. Raúl's mother-in-law, who serves as secretary at the Path of Life Church, has provided important administrative support for the ministry since its outset. More help is currently needed in this area, since the ministry has grown. Talented worship leaders also have been critical to the program, since corporate worship is an important and regular aspect of life at the Path of Life Transitional Home. This important need is currently being met by Raúl's wife and Juan's wife, who lead worship for the weekly Friday evening praise and prayer time with the men. The ministry also relies on volunteer teachers. Three pastors and one lay person from the church assist in teaching various life skills classes for the men. One, for example, teaches a class on anger management (a subject he also teaches in area schools on behalf of the county).

<4> Community Support. While many people are open, in theory, to a ministry like Path of Life's, few actually want a men's transitional home right in their own neighborhood. Local officials may respond enthusiastically to this kind of vision, but Raúl warns that it is not unusual to be met instead with skepticism or hostility. He worked hard to gain support for the home within the community by sharing his vision with as many people as he could. He spoke with his congressman, the county supervisor, officials from HUD, and the mayor. Initially, they were skeptical. Gaining their trust took time. Now that the home has been in operation for close to three years and has experienced a measure of success, it enjoys more support from certain key local officials. Today, Raúl and Juan work closely with parole officers and judges from several surrounding counties who routinely refer men to the Path of Life Transitional Home.

LESSONS LEARNED

Path of Life leaders highlight several lessons learned in implementing their ministry:

► **Be conscious of local ordinances that may affect such a ministry.** Both Juan and Raul are careful to emphasize that Path of Life is a “transitional” home and not a “drug rehabilitation” ministry. In California, if a home refers to the work it does as “rehabilitation,” the implication is that it is engaged in a specific type of counseling and that it employs the services of medical personnel. Such ministries are also required to carry a specific type of liability insurance that is very expensive.

► **Take a balanced approach.** While it is important to have rules governing the lives of the men in the program, it is equally important to take a grace-centered approach that sees each man as an individual. Each situation needs to be handled on a case-by-case basis. A legalistic, cookie-cutter approach can be too heavy-handed. At times Juan has allowed men to stay in the program who have committed an infraction that would have gotten them immediately expelled from other similar programs.



Program participant doing morning chores.

► **Don't just minister to the men, minister to their families as well.** It is possible to isolate the men too much. In many programs, men are allowed little if any contact with their families. By contrast, Path of Life allows the men a fair degree of interaction with their families. Juan will conduct joint counseling sessions with men and their spouses and men are allowed to worship with their family on Sundays and spend time with them afterwards at a church softball game. They are given passes to see their families and some men occasionally will have their sons sleep over at the Transitional Home.

► **Provide the men with supervised interaction with women.** Path of Life's program does this through church functions such as the weekly softball game. This allows men to learn how to interact appropriately with women so that when they graduate from the program, any subsequent relationships they have stand a better chance of succeeding. As Danny, one of the students puts it, “With other programs, you're isolated from women. When you get out it's a shock and you don't know how to act around them. Here, they keep you involved with women...in monitored situations.”

► **Insist on a dress code.** Although Juan did not initially insist that the men wear a tie to the Sunday service at the church, he has since changed his mind. He now argues that it affects how the men feel about themselves and their sense of self-worth, and it shows respect for God.



CHALLENGES

Path of Life has experienced several challenges along the way. The greatest has been designing ways of effectively following-up with graduates from the program. Juan tries to stay in touch with men who have left the Path of Life Home. But because many of them are referred to the home from surrounding counties, it can be very difficult to maintain contact with them. The most he is usually able to do is follow-up with a phone call thirty to sixty days after they have left the program and try to ensure that they are attending church. He readily admits that this is a weakness in the way the program is set up. Ideally, he would like to offer a class where he could meet with both graduates and their families once a month.

The second main challenge Path of Life has tried to overcome was the initial skepticism among community officials, and subsequently, few referrals to the program in its early days. As Raul recalls, “(County or city officials) are not going to give you any money or support. They will [only] pat you on the back. But if you make it happen, they’ll listen. You earn the right to sit at the table.”

A third challenge is securing long-term employment for the men. Many men with families finish these types of programs and return home without a job. Often the wife has been running the home for several years by herself and is unwilling to trust either the man’s ability to support the family or his right to make decisions affecting its well-being. Juan feels this problem might be lessened if the men were able to obtain and hold steady employment for a significant time period while still in the program, so that when they returned home their spouses would be more inclined to trust them.



CHURCH CONNECTION

An important aspect of the transitional program has been its connection to Path of Life Church. On Sundays and holidays, members from the church and family members of the men meet at the Transitional Home for a softball game and barbecue. In addition, when a man enters the program an attempt is made to find a family in the church that will be his sponsor. Sponsors provide a man entering the program with any item he might need in the way of clothes, razor, etc. and interact with him after church on Sundays. At holiday times, these sponsors provide gifts to the men.

“Although local officials may respond enthusiastically to your vision, do not be surprised if you meet with skepticism or hostility.”



ADVICE *For Other Pastors/Church Leaders*

When asked what advice they would give to other church pastors or leaders considering starting a ministry similar to the Path of Life Transitional Home, Raul and Juan had several things to say:

▶ Know that you are called to this type of ministry. It is not a profession but a calling. Juan and his wife knew ahead of time that there would be a price to pay for serving God by managing the ministry. They live in an upstairs apartment in the men's home. During the first year, while they were still renovating the men's home, there were no doors in the house at all—obviously limiting their privacy.

▶ Be a person who fasts, prays, and seeks the Lord. The spiritual disciplines are absolutely crucial for your longevity and success in this type of ministry.

▶ Have a strong support network. You need the personal support of your spouse and family, intercessors who are committed to praying for you on a regular basis, and relationships with other pastors, who can encourage you, support you, and to whom you are accountable.

▶ As director, don't put yourself above the men. You have to begin by being honest about yourself and earn the trust of the men through time and honesty. Be willing to just hang out with the men. Relationships are key. Be merciful and patient.

▶ If you don't have prior experience, spend some time in a men's home yourself. If you are a pastor who has little or no experience with this type of ministry, if at all possible, spend from one to three months in a transitional home yourself.

Who Could Do This, Too?

Path of Life Transitional Home was launched by a small church with relatively few resources. Yet through the men helped by the program, the church has succeeded not only in affecting its immediate community but the surrounding communities as well. Crucial to this success has been the vision of Raúl Díaz to see the church have an impact beyond its four walls; his heart to see men's lives transformed; and the years of personal experience he brings to the table. Equally important has been the part played by Juan Salinas, who like Raul, has years of personal experience with transitional homes, a genuine heart for the men, and a willingness to pay the price such a ministry requires. Each man understands his own role as well as the importance of the job done by the other.

Clearly, the long years of personal experience brought by Raul and Juan have been critical to this ministry's success. Similar ministries will need to have some staff or advisors who also have some personal experience.