

SiMPLE CHURCH

... Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples

By Thom S. Rainer & Eric Geiger
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Out of complexity, find simplicity – Alberta Einstein

In his earthly ministry, Jesus simplified the complexity of the 'religious' system of his day. He took the 613 laws and simplified their essence down to two... Here Jesus wasn't abolishing or lowering the standard of the Law, he simplified it to make it easier for followers to understand.

Jesus cleansed the temple of the hollow mess people had made of it, and brought worshippers back to the basics of relational communion with God.

Even while explaining the demands of following him, Jesus said his yoke was 'easy' and his burden was light; he offered a simplified (yet profound) grace relationship with God.

The premise of this book is that just as Jesus simplified the 'religious order' of his day, we too need to simplify the experience of today's church related to the development of disciples in fulfilling the mission of the church.

Formal definition of a 'Simple Church' (pages 67-68)

A simple church is designed around a straightforward and strategic process that moves people through the stages of spiritual growth. The leadership and the church are clear about the process (clarity) and are committed to executing it. The process flows logically (movement) and is implemented in each area of the church (alignment). The church abandons everything that is not in the process (focus).

The Flow of a Simple Church

CLARITY – **MOVEMENT** – **ALIGNMENT** – **FOCUS**
Purpose/process People/process Prioritized Program Prioritized Planning

Understanding the Flow of the Simple Church Paradigm by Illustration

In The Extreme Makeover: Home Edition a team of expert designers and builders accept one project into which all of their energies are exercised. Not only does the 'Makeover Team' come up with impressive concepts; they also execute their plans. Their design remains incomplete without the creation of an implementation plan to complete the task before them.

They begin with **CLARITY** – they first design an overall concept for the home and ensure everyone 'gets it'. It involves evaluating the present condition of the home and needs of the family. They engage in robust discussion... they dream... they discuss with passion what the home could become. They know where they are headed. Before they leave they pile their hands on top of one another and go for it. As they disperse, you feel like you're watching a team leaving their locker room. In a very real way, you are.

The design team also sets up the project in sequential steps so it flows smoothly (**MOVEMENT**). The project must move forward. Their project is broken down into sequential steps that are laid out in a manner all of the stakeholders can understand.

The team also masters **ALIGNMENT**. They wisely place all of their resources and volunteers around their design process. Materials and volunteers are strategically placed. Volunteers and equipment are coordinated based on the sequence of the project.

Finally the team stays **FOCUSED** on the task. They encourage each other, often reminding themselves why they are doing what they are doing. They keep their eyes on the goal, always aware of a looming deadline. They manage on their own passion. They monitor their own commitment.

Apply the principles seen in this illustration to the leadership of the church.

CLARITY

Clarity is the ability of the process of mission/vision to be communicated and understood by the people. When it comes to the purpose of the church and how it is experienced in the setting of the church, people 'get it'. It involves certainty and eliminates confusion. For a church to be simple, the process must have a high degree of clarity. In the minds of the congregation, the 'how' is clear because the process is discussed, taught and illustrated.

Some churches are not clear on a ministry process because they do not have one. Others have one but it is far too complex, too complicated, too long or too confusing. The process that allows the church to function and flow 'naturally' is ineffective because it cannot be understood. Without understanding – commitment wanes. Understanding always precedes commitment.

Before a process can be taught to the people, it must first be clearly understood in the minds of the leaders. In this regard most church leaders often stumble when asked to explain the 'ministry process' of the church.

Such lack of clarity or understanding ultimately leads to confusion and complexity because there is no coherent direction... leaving people to assume or invent one that seems to satisfy their personal understanding of ministry importance and direction.

For a church to experience effectiveness, they need to have a certainty of 'how' God is leading them to make disciples. Their ministry becomes a reflection of their certainty of this process.

MOVEMENT

Movement describes the sequential steps in the process that cause people to move to greater areas of commitment. Movement is all about 'flow', about assimilation or adoption into the family of God. It is what causes a person to go to the next step in their walk with God.

Movement is more difficult to explain, but the illustration of a 'relay race' serves us well. Such races are usually won or lost in the process of handing off the baton to the runner who will run the next leg of the race. Movement is all about 'handoffs'; it is what happens in between the programs. It is 'how' someone is handed off from one level of commitment to a greater level of commitment (ie... the movement from a person who is attending worship who moves into a small group) How a church is designed to move a person from being more of an 'observer' to being a 'contributor' is 'movement'.

If a church fails to work on the 'handoffs' in allowing people to move deeper and deeper into relationship with God through the ministry of the church, it usually because it has become preoccupied with the programs of the church. It has failed to see 'the process' by which the 'purpose' will be fulfilled through the flow of a progression through the stages of spiritual development and engagement in becoming committed to God.

Assimilation effectiveness is more important than program effectiveness. Simple church leaders design a ministry process with 'flow' where their programs are placed as tools along the process to accomplish the purpose of the church.

ALIGNMENT

Alignment is the arrangement of all ministries and staff around the same simple process. Under alignment, all ministry departments submit and attach themselves to the same overarching process; focused on fulfilling the purpose of the church.

Alignment ensures the entire church body is moving in the same direction, and in the same manner. When a church is fully aligned, all ministries are operating from the same ministry blueprint. The ministries not only embrace the simple process, but they are engaged in it. Each ministry department mirrors the process in that particular area.

Without alignment a church's flow erodes to a multitude of sub-ministries with leaders who are only passionate about their specific ministry. In such a scenario, everyone is competing for the same space, the same resources, the same volunteers and the same time on the calendar.

Churches naturally drift away from alignment. Therefore an ongoing check-in experience needs to occur that enables the church to remain 'aligned' in purpose, process and program alignment. (This prevents programs from becoming an end in themselves.)

FOCUS

Focus is the commitment to abandon everything that falls outside of the simple ministry process. Focus requires saying 'yes' to the best and 'no' to everything else (setting priorities).

While MOVEMENT is difficult to explain, FOCUS is difficult to implement. It takes deep conviction and guts and at times does not make leaders popular. Without a commitment to 'focus' the church on its purpose and process, the steps of Clarity,

Movement and Alignment remain ineffective. Focus is the element that gives power and energy to these three preceding steps in moving people to deeper levels of commitment.

Simple church leaders are focused people. They aren't mean, or don't necessarily like saying 'no' - they are just people committed to the process God has given their church. They ask difficult questions. They have blinders on in becoming preoccupied with ensuring nothing impedes the flow of the process in the church.

CONGESTION

When alignment doesn't take place consciously in the church the result is a bottle neck experience in which 'congestion' takes place. The authors share the concepts of a 'traffic jam' and 'nasal congestion' to stress their premise. Reflect upon these 'word pictures' and then relate them to the average church programming format. Without understanding the 'flow' of every program present in the church, it will eventually impede the natural flow of the process towards discipleship. Without a focused and prioritized assessment of how each program 'fits' into the purpose and process of the church, don't expect to have success in establishing the desired 'movement' of ministry throughout the life of the church.

Illustrating how this works in a church context (pages 88/114)

1. Gather leadership to develop 'simple' church process based on their church purpose.
 - i. The process is just as important as the purpose because the process makes everything 'work' together.
 - ii. People in the church must know and understand the process because they are the key to fulfilling it.
 - iii. People cannot embrace the ambiguous.
 - iv. The simple process should be spoken of frequently in the leadership experience of the church. This allows the 'main thing' to stay the 'main thing'
 - a. surface the process in meetings
 - b. test leaders on it – so they can identify it readily
 - c. brainstorm new ways to communicate it.
 - Articulate it corporately
 - Share it interpersonally
 - Live it personally (travel agent or guide – pg 132)
 - v. Everything that happens is seen through the lens of the process. It becomes the means through evaluating success of each step and program as moving the church toward its purpose.
2. Determine what kind of disciples they seek to develop at their church (based on church purpose statement).

3. Define what such disciples will look like in the process.
 - i. Intimate with God and other Christians
 - ii. People who grow in their faith
 - iii. Servants of the Kingdom of God.“Moving a person from salvation to spiritual maturity to significant ministry”
4. Describe the discipleship focus as a process:
 - i. Connecting
 - ii. Growing
 - iii. Serving
5. Decide how each weekly program is part of the process. Assign key programs to each step in the process
 - i. Worship – Connecting with God and other believers
 - ii. Small Groups – growing deeper in faith
 - iii. Serving Groups – allow opportunities for service as per needs
 - iv. Illustrate your plans in a ‘word picture’ so people can ‘see’ the process
 - v. Illustration should be reflective of the process
 - vi. Illustration should show progression of the process
 - vii. Illustration should help simplify the process
6. Measure progress of the process by keeping track of ‘numbers.’ We count what is important to us. See statistically horizontally (progress towards maturity) rather than vertically – how each program (silo) is doing. Measure at each age level (children – youth – adults) of process.
7. Create ‘hand off’ points in process – that allow flow to occur
 - i. Small groups use studies based on Sunday message and people are invited to get into a small group to ‘get more information and go deeper’
 - ii. When entering a small group – members are invited to exercise their faith in a ‘serving group’ to apply their faith experience
8. Process is replicated for youth and children with appropriate programs

Andy Stanley – Northpoint Community Church Illustration

...moving people to greater levels of commitment and relationship

Foyer – welcome and initial connections (Worship)

to Living Room – where relationships are built (GroupLink)

to Kitchen – where intimate conversations occur. Where life happens together...

where people are transformed in community with others. (Small Groups)

For any congregation struggling with strategic planning, this book will be a God-send! Until reading this title, all books dealing with strategic church planning were hard to understand, hard to follow, and even harder to communicate to others. Rainer and Geiger now finally have made church strategic planning simple. In less than 250 pages, the authors have presented an extreme makeover process to take a congregation from a bloated, burnt-out organization to a streamlined, sleek spiritual body. The steps described here are simple, but far from easy and painless. For any pastor or church leader who is planning strategically, this book is a must-read! David R Bees.

Overall Simple Church is a practical and helpful read. For churches which are overloaded with events and programs the book will prove to be invaluable. One thing not mentioned by the book, nor so far in this review is the gift simplicity gives to the Christian who desires to spend time with lost people. When life together as a church is simplified people will have more margin to spend time doing things with and for people outside of the church community. In an era where Christian people must go to others in the world, simplicity will only help that process. I did take to heart the good news given by the authors on page 230 – “Attention church planters: this information is good news for you. While you have little money, own no land or buildings, you are able to design from scratch.” Amen, and amen. Reid S Monaghan