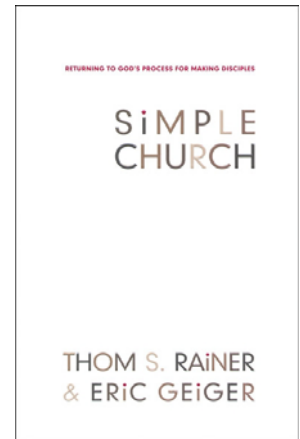


Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples. Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006.



In a paragraph:

Churches with a clear disciple-making process are vibrant and growing. "Vibrant" churches do four things: design a simple disciple-making process, organize key programs to accomplish this, unite all ministries around the process, and eliminate everything else. Some of the book's best advice concerns dropping programs that seem successful but contribute nothing to the mission.

In a page:

Thom Rainer, Ph.D., president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, along with Eric Geiger, Ed. D., executive pastor of Christ Fellowship, share a clear message from case studies of four hundred American churches: Church is done best when it's kept simple.

Churches with a simple process for reaching and maturing people are expanding the kingdom. Complex churches are struggling and anemic.

The authors have observed the simple church in action and they want others to see it, too. Simple churches are thriving, and they are doing so by taking four ideas to heart: Clarity. Movement. Alignment. Focus.

"We compared growing and vibrant churches to non-growing and struggling churches. Church leaders from both groups were asked to complete the same survey which was designed to measure how simple their church discipleship process was. We anticipated that there would be a relationship between a simple process and church vitality, but the results were greater than we imagined. Our statistical consultant told us that we had found something big."

"The vibrant churches were much more simple than the comparison churches. The difference was so big that the probability of the results occurring with one church by chance is less than one in a thousand."

"Imagine a church where you, as a leader, can articulate clearly how someone moves from being a new Christian to become a mature follower of Christ. Imagine that your church is no longer just busy but is alive with ministries and activities that make a difference. Such is the simple church revolution."

Simple Church Summary in 8 pages...

By Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger

We have concluded that church leaders need to simplify. Ironically people are hungry for simple because the world has become much more complex. Churches with a simple process for reaching and maturing people are expanding the kingdom.

We are not suggesting that the simple approach to ministry is a change in doctrine or conviction. We are not saying that churches should become simple because it is in style or culturally hip. Precisely because things are so hectic and out of control people respond to simple. We also are not saying that churches should have a simple process just for pragmatic reasons. We are also not claiming that a simple church design is easy. Many of our churches have become cluttered. So cluttered that people have a difficult time encountering the simple and powerful message of Christ. So cluttered that many people are busy doing church instead of being the church. Perhaps we are losing ground not despite our overabundance of activity but because of it.

Ministry schizophrenia occurs when churches and church leaders are not sure who they are. It occurs most often when churches attempt to blend multiple church models into one. When ministry philosophies collide, schizophrenia happens.

To have a simple church, leaders must ensure that everything their church does fits together to produce life change. Simple church leaders are designers. They design opportunities for spiritual growth. Complex church leaders are programmers. They run ministry programs. Church leaders who are designers are focused on the end result, the overall picture. They are as concerned with what happens between the programs as with the programs themselves. They have designed a simple process that moves people through stages of spiritual growth. Without a point of crisis, it is difficult to change. Problems are always bigger when everyone is tired. If the goal is to keep certain things going, the church is in trouble. The end result must always be about people. Programs should only be tools. Recruiting talented staff with different ministry philosophies or approaches is a foundation for frustration and disaster.

The church must pour out God's grace to the world so that people may grow in His grace. Many churches need an extreme makeover. And the intended result of such a makeover must be the intersection of people with God's grace. Some churches need some tweaking, while others need to redesign completely. Church leaders must craft opportunities where people will encounter the grace of God. Simple church leaders excel in designing a ministry process that leads to spiritual growth and vitality. They design a simple process and abandon everything else. They rely on their simple process to create the environments conducive to

spiritual growth. A simple church is a congregation designed around a straightforward and strategic process that moves people through the stages of spiritual growth. The leadership and 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).

Clarity is the ability of the process to be communicated and understood by the people. Before the process can be clear to the people in the church, it must first be clear to the leaders. A lack of clarity ultimately leads to confusion and complexity because there is no coherent direction.

Movement is the sequential steps in the process that cause people to move to greater areas of commitment. Movement is about flow. Movement is the most difficult simple church element to understand. Assimilation effectiveness is more important than programmatic effectiveness.

Alignment is the arrangement of all ministries and staff around the same simple process. Alignment ensures the entire church body is moving in the direction, and in the same manner. In a church that lacks alignment, everyone is competing for the same space, resources, volunteers, and time on the calendar. All churches naturally drift away from alignment. Without alignment, complexity is certain.

Focus is the commitment to abandon everything that falls outside of the simple ministry process. Focus is the most difficult element to implement. Focus is the element that gives power and energy to clarity, movement, and alignment. In many churches the original tools for life change have created too much clutter. Instead of uniting, they divide focus. The programs have become ends in themselves.

Hell will not be able to hold back the church. Jesus says he is going to unleash a movement that will be so powerful and intense that it will be unstoppable. This movement is alive and growing. Ministry naturally drifts toward complexity, complexity just happens. Unfortunately, "complexity dilutes your potential for impact." The church is designed to move people to greater levels of commitment and relationships. All steps must take people somewhere. They must not be ends in themselves. Less really is more.

Build lives. That is what ministry is all about. It is what you and your church are called to do. You are called to partner with God in a great building project. You are to build the spiritual house by bring people into a relationship with God. And you are to build the lives of individuals by helping them progress in the faith. To build the lives of people effectively, you need a clear ministry process. There is a highly significant relationship between church vitality and the clarity of the process. If you want your process to be clear, you must define it, illustrate it,

discuss it, and measure it. You must also constantly monitor the understanding of your people in regard to your process. Defining your ministry process is extremely important. Without definition, people are clueless about how the church is designed to bring people toward spiritual maturity. If the process is not clearly defined so that everyone is speaking the same language, there is confusion and frustration. If there is not one clearly defined how, people construct multiple interpretations on the direction of the church.

Defining the process is formulating a strategy. Church leaders must define more than the purpose (the what); they must also define the process (the how). The process is more important than the purpose of a company because it is the process that makes everything work. People within a church must know the process because they are integral to fulfilling it. A clearly defined process encourages people to progress through it because they know the expectation. Determine what kind of disciple you wish to produce in your church. Narrow this list down as much as possible. After you conclude what you desire people in your church or ministry to be, describe this in process terms. In other words, describe your purpose in sequential order.

Your programs say what is important to you; therefore you must define how each program is used to produce the kinds of disciples God has called you to make. The programs must specifically be defined how they will be used to move people through the process of spiritual transformation. If you want your church members to see your simple process clearly, you must illustrate it. The simple process is more likely to resonate with each person if it is visual. People are more likely to remember it. People will not live out something they cannot remember. If they can attach the process to something that is etched in their minds, they are more likely to embrace it. The illustration should be reflective of your process. The illustration should help simplify. For people to take your ministry process seriously, it has to be measured. For people to internalize the simple how in your church, you have to evaluate it. The cliché is true: what gets evaluated, gets done. Measurement also helps leaders know if people are progressing through the process. Learn to view your numbers horizontally and not vertically. Measure attendance at each level/stage in your process.

For the simple process to become woven into the identity of the church, it must be discussed frequently. For the simple process to become a part of the culture of the church, it first must be woven into the leadership culture. If the hearts of the leaders do not beat passionately for it, the people will miss it. View everything through the lens of your simple process. By using your ministry process language frequently, you will establish a new vocabulary at your church. Test the leaders on it. Brainstorm new ways to communicate it. When the process starts to feel old, brainstorm fresh ways to communicate it. When people understand the process, they are able to embrace it personally. They are also able to bring others through it. As a leader, you must increase the level of process understanding in your church. Articulate the process corporately. You must also

discuss the process interpersonally with other people. The most important way you help people understand the defined ministry process is through your personal behavior—living and doing what you are asking people to live and do. Take people on a journey with you. If you get in the boat, the ministry process will come alive.

Our churches should be filled with people who are becoming more like Christ. Becoming more loving and joyful. God desires to transform the people in Your church into His image. And He wants to do so with ever-increasing glory. Congested churches and stagnant believers are the antithesis of God's plan. There is a significant relationship between the vitality of a local church and movement of the church's ministry process. If you want your process to move people, your programming must be strategic and sequential. You must also intentionally move people, offer a clear next step, and provide a class for new members. Simple church leaders view programs as tools to place people in the pathway of God's morphing. Placing your programs along your process is an extension of the clarity element. It is matching your programs with the simple process God has given your church. Choose one program for each phase of your process. Multiple programs for each phase of the process divide attention and energy. Design each program for a specific aspect of the process. Be sure that program effectively engages people in that aspect of the process. Place the programs in sequential order. Sequential programming produces movement. Order the sequence of your programs to reflect your process. The order of the programming must flow from the order of the process.

Designate a clear entry-point to your process. Identify the next levels of programming. The commitment should increase with each level of programming. The challenge is moving people through the process. Intentionally moving people through your ministry process is vital. Without movement, programs are an end to themselves. As you seek to move people from one program to another, think in terms of short-term steps. The steps should not be new programs. They should be short-term opportunities that expose people to an aspect of the process that they have not yet experienced. People move because someone else brings them through the process. Since relationships are so vital, set up relational connections between the programs. It is the handoffs that count. Movement is what happens in between the programs. Movement is how someone is handed off from one program to another. Relationships, not information, bridge the process. Capitalize on the power of relationships. View the present program as a bridge to the next program in the process. People stick to a church when they get involved in a small group. Just as children need nurture and attention during their formative years, so do new believers. Offering a clear next step for new believers is essential.

New believers are often the most vocal missionaries a church has. They still know lost people. They have a fire in them that many older believers lose. New believers are the greatest resource your church has to influence the community.

“New Christians who immediately became active in a small group are five times more likely to remain in the church five years later than those who were active in worship services alone.” Discipleship of new believers does not just happen. It must be intentional. Simple churches are purposeful in their treatment of new members. It is critical that you use some type of new member training to move new people effectively into the life of the church. Typically at new member groups or classes, the beliefs, practices, and direction of the church are discussed. People get a chance to understand exactly what they are joining. They hear the heartbeat of your church. Great dialogue occurs, and people walk away with a deeper connection to your church. We have observed that simple church leaders use their new member training to teach their process and ask for commitment. Challenge your potential members to bring others through the ministry process.

Unity is powerful. And the impact is great. Such is the essence of alignment. It is not enough to unite the church around the same what (purpose), but they also must be aligned on the same how (process). Without alignment, complexity is assured. If you want to maximize everyone’s energy, you must recruit on the process, offer accountability, implement the same process everywhere, unite leaders around the process, and ensure that new ministries fit. The right players are vital. Without the right leaders, the church will never be aligned. People follow leadership, and if leadership is not moving in the same direction, the people are scattered. It is vital that you recruit and hire people based in part to their commitment to your ministry process. It is critical that you hire and place leaders in key positions who are deeply committed to your simple ministry process. They must be committed not only to ministry but also to how your church does ministry. Churches that bring people on the team who are committed to their simple process are enjoying the power of alignment. Everyone’s energy is moving in the same direction. Churches need leaders who are deeply committed to a core belief system. Theological alignment among leaders in the same church is important. While theological alignment is critical, so is philosophical alignment. If not, the church will move in a multiplicity of directions, driven by varying ministry philosophies. You should reference your simple ministry process as you higher and recruit. Use it to evaluate if potential leaders are a good fit with the direction of your ministry. You should recruit people who are not just accepting of your simple ministry process, but are deeply committed to it.

First, recruit on process. Second, offer accountability to leadership. One important aspect of leadership is accountability. It is especially critical to alignment. Without accountability, people naturally drift away from the declared ministry process. Church leaders must avoid the two extremes of micromanagement and neglect. Micromanagement stifles creativity and hampers shared leadership. Neglect fosters complacency and leads to fragmented team. Leaders should outline the simple process but then allow ministry leaders to implement with freedom and creativity. At the beginning of each year, sit down with each staff member to discuss his or her ministry action plan. From these considerations each staff member sets five to seven measurable goals for the

new ministry year. The staff member also outlines how these goals will be accomplished. Each staff member presents his goals to the entire staff. A church that is committed to alignment implements the same process everywhere. Integrating the same process in each ministry department makes a profound impact. Understanding is increased. Unity is promoted. Families experience the same process. When a local body of Christ is not united in the same direction, the body is ineffective. The simple ministry process provides a framework for leaders in the church to rally around. There is a clear direction, and each person has a place to plug into it.

Unity is best expressed in the midst of diversity. Using your simple process as a unifying factor brings philosophical alignment. When people commit not only to the doctrinal beliefs of a church but also to the simple and strategic process, the energy of everyone is unleashed. The process of the church should become a point of agreement where people understand how ministry is accomplished. In order to keep leaders focused on the simple ministry process, you must remind them of the process and highlight their contributions to it. Show people how their seemingly small act of service is part of the big picture God is painting in your church. You must ensure that new ministries clearly fit into the overall design. The most challenging aspect of alignment is pulling existing ministries and existing staff in the same direction, especially if they have been moving in opposite directions. It is much easier to align new people and new ministries to the overall direction. If they do not fit, you simply do not allow them to begin. It is vital that you make sure new ministries fit into the simple process before they begin. Afterwards it is too late. Simple church leaders ensure it is a viable part of the simple ministry process. They ensure that the leaders of the new ministry understand how the ministry is part of the big picture. Ministry expansions are new ministries that are geared toward a specific age group or life stage. Ministry additions are new ministries that fulfill a specific function within the simple process.

There is an epidemic of fast-food spirituality among believers today. Many churches have become like fast-food establishments. A new idea emerges, and the menu is expanded. And we keep getting more and more unhealthy. The appropriate response: Stay focused on your simple process. Say no to everything else. This factor is the most difficult simple church element to implement and practice. It means saying no a lot. Saying no must be done with God's wisdom and timing. Staying focused is essential to being simple, and a church cannot stay focused without saying no. After you have designed a simple church process with clarity, movement, and alignment, you are not done. There will be a constant temptation to abandon simplicity, to lose focus, to become cluttered. In our study, churches that are single-minded when it comes to their ministry process were far more likely to be a vibrant and growing church. You must eliminate nonessential programs, limit adding more programs, reduce special events, and ensure the process is easy to communicate and simple to understand. Many churches are littered with clutter. We do not believe it is

impossible for a church to become simple. But it is difficult. It requires an absolute focus on the ministry process. Since elimination is a matter of stewardship, it is a spiritual issue. Eliminating programs, as God leads, is choosing to be wise stewards of the time and resources He has given.

Our observation is that simple churches exhibit excellence to a greater degree than complex churches. It is not that leaders of complex churches lack a commitment to excellence. They simply cannot provide it with the number of programs they oversee. Eliminate nonessential programs and then limit adding new ones. In general, vibrant churches funnel needs and emphases through their existing programs. While the comparison churches are program-centered, the vibrant churches are process-centered. The discipline to use existing programs allows leaders to provide constant promotion of the process and the programs within it. Simple church leaders have come to realize that less is more. Less programs mean more focus on the programs offered.

While we are advocating that you use existing programs, we are not suggesting that you never begin something new. New options are necessary, and new options are not new programs. A new option is just an expansion of your present programming, and this is a big difference. Giving new options helps engage people who are not involved. It also frees up space, multiplies ministry, and provides energy. After you have designed your simple ministry process, all of your programming focus should go to executing the process. In general, simple churches are so focused on their ministry process that there is little time for extra events. If special events are always publicized in a church, the essential programs that move people through the process are not properly emphasized. Moreover, the events compete with the essential programs for the time of the people. Reducing special event is a challenge. Some special events can be beneficial to the church if they are used strategically. Funnel the event into an existing program. In some situations, combining the special event with an existing program is more effective. If the event cannot be funneled into or combined with an existing program, then it must be placed strategically along the simple process.

It is vital that your process be easy to communicate. If you want people to understand why you are so passionate about your ministry process, you must be able to communicate it with ease. If you desire for people to agree with the single-minded focus of your church, your process must be easily articulated. Your process must not only be simple on your side of the communication equation, but it also must be simple for the hearer to grasp. Understand leads to focus and commitment. Making your process understandable requires simple language and brevity.

McDonalds is influencing future generations. Churches are not. While the impact of McDonalds is spreading, the impact of the church is shrinking. In fact, most churches are spiritually stagnant and declining numerically. And this decline is in

the midst of an increasing population. The church, as a whole, is doing more and more. And the church, as a whole, is making less and less of a difference. The kingdom is not about chatter. It is about action. Change or die. Those are the choices. The majority of churches choose not to change. They would rather die. Tragically, in most churches, the pain of change is greater than the pain of ineffectiveness. In fact, the longer your church has been complex, the more difficult the transition will be. On one hand, you must move to simple as fast as you can. So much depends on it. On the other hand, you must move to simple slowly. You have the heart of a shepherd, and you care for the people in your church. Allow God to give you wisdom and grant you favor. Get on God's timetable. Move to simple as God leads. Use wisdom and compassion in becoming a simple church. Here is the bottom line: Get there as fast as you can but not faster.

Complexity is often synonymous with mediocrity. First design a simple ministry process for your church-on paper. During this step, you are simply exploring what a process for discipleship would look like at your church. Use this step to create an environment receptive to change. Do not make the mistake of beginning with your existing programs. Begin with a blank sheet of paper. Involve others in the discussion. Narrow your definition of discipleship down to a few key points. Now it is time to discuss how it happens. After you have chosen a few key aspects of discipleship, place them in sequential order. The first step in the process should be the first level of commitment. Spend time discussing and preaching your process. The clearer this process for spiritual transformation is to people in your church, the easier the next transition steps will be. Choose one church-wide program for each phase of your simple process. The purpose of the program should coincide with the particular part of the process. You may have some programs left over, meaning they do not fit into your process. At this point the complexity becomes obvious. You will want to be sure each program in your process is designed to meet that specific aspect of discipleship effectively. Here is where the resistance to change happens. When you tweak a program, you are tweaking tradition. Now you must align each ministry around the same process. The more you involve other leaders in the design of the simple process, the easier it will be to unite them around it. Begin to eliminate things outside the process (focus). OK, this is where the change REALLY is felt. You must use wisdom.