

EIGHT

Focus: Saying No to Almost Everything

Art is a process of elimination. The sculptor produces the beautiful statue by chipping away such parts of the marble block as are not needed.

~ Elbert Hubbard

Clarity → Movement → Alignment → Focus

As you can tell, both of us enjoy research. We love truth, and research seeks to discover truth. Research brings clarity to thinking and forces recommendations to be based on objective facts rather than causal observation or anecdotal wisdom.

One recent research project caught the attention of hundreds of thousands of Americans, the movie industry, and the fast-food restaurant industry. The recent research project was qualitative in nature and built upon an in-depth experimental research model. The documentary film chronicling the experiment is destined to be a cult classic.

*We are talking about *Super-Size Me*.*

*Perhaps you were expecting something a bit more serious. You will not find *Super-Size Me* in the libraries of an academic institution or the annals of research journals. However, you can pick a copy up of this film at your local Blockbuster or order it through your Netflix account. While the film is a bit satirical, the results of the research are compelling, interesting, and appalling.*

**Super-Size Me* is a low-budget independent documentary about the impacts of eating fast food consistently. Morgan Spurlock was the researcher and the producer of the film. He documented a monthlong experiment with McDonalds.*

For an entire month all Spurlock ate was food from the golden arches. The film takes you, the viewer, on the monthlong eating adventure.

You observe the results unfolding as you watch the movie. You are on the journey with the McDonalds-driven life. Thirty days of processed food. Devotionals not included.

Spurlock had three rules in his experiment. First, he had to accept supersize portions if they were offered. They often were, and for only forty cents who can blame his indulgence? Second, he could only eat what is available on the McDonalds menu. Nothing else could enter his body, not even a Tic Tac. Third, he had to eat every item on the menu at least once.

This would be a dream month for most kids. So what were the results?

Spurlock began the study weighing 185 pounds, athletic, and healthy. He did not remain so. He gained twenty-five pounds in one month. He began to suffer from fatigue, headaches, and indigestion. His body basically fell apart over the course of the McDiet. His blood sugar skyrocketed. His liver filled with fat. His cholesterol went off the charts, and his blood pressure was unmanageable.

Since viewing the movie, Eric has not eaten fast food. (Thom's note: He insists pizza is not fast food.) The results of Spurlock's experiment are clear. They confirm what we already knew, but seeing the extreme results is alarming.

The conclusion: Fast food is not healthy.

In fact, many doctors believe it is killing Americans. The appropriate response: Say no to fast food.

The menu at fast-food restaurants has continually expanded. More and more types of food are offered. The sizes have also increased. What was once a regular order of fries is now a child-size order in many establishments.

We, the consumers, are to blame. We like food, and we like it fast. We have developed taste buds for fries dipped in grease and burgers cooked in masses. Fast-food establishments are simply capitalizing on our poor choices. Our tastes and our busy lives have expanded the menus . . . and our waistlines.

And we keep getting more and more unhealthy.

Spiritual Super-Size Me

There is an epidemic of fast-food spirituality among believers today. We like big spiritual menus with lots of options. And we want those options served to us fast.

Many churches have become like fast-food establishments. A new idea emerges, and the menu is expanded. Someone wants a special event served a particular way, and the menu is expanded. People assume the more that can be squeezed into the menu, the better. So the brochure, the week, the calendar, the schedule, and the process get expanded. Cluttered.

And we keep getting more and more unhealthy.

One would think that the more programs and the more special events that are offered, the greater the impact. Our research has confirmed that the opposite is true. Unfortunately, the big and expanding menus are not producing vibrant churches.

The conclusion: fast-food spirituality is not healthy. In fact, the large and fast menu approach to ministry is killing our churches.

The appropriate response: Stay focused on your simple process. Say no to everything else.

If you follow the input given in this book, you will begin designing a simple process for ministry. It will be clear, and it will move people toward spiritual maturity. You will also align all of your people and your ministries around this process.

Then the hard part will begin, and it will never end. It will be ongoing for the rest of your ministry life.

Focus.

As we have said from the beginning, this factor is the most difficult simple church element to implement and practice. It means saying no a lot.

Saying no is difficult. No church leader wants to be perceived as David Spade on the Capital One commercials. You have seen those commercials, the ones where Spade says no to every question, to every call. Church leaders do not want to be that guy.

Church leaders have feelings. Well, most of them do. Seriously, most have the heart of a pastor who cares deeply for the people they serve. Saying no is difficult because it tends to bother the person who hears it. While it may be difficult, our research indicates that it is necessary.

Saying no must be done with God's wisdom and timing. You must remember that you are dealing with people who have feelings.

Staying focused is essential to being simple, and a church cannot stay focused without saying no. While it is not easy, the health of the church is at stake. We must boycott fast-food spirituality. We must focus.

One Thing

Focus is a truth taught and affirmed throughout Scripture. The focus of individuals in the Bible is humbling, and the principle of one thing emerges.

David prayed in Psalm 27:4, "I have asked one thing from the LORD; it is what I desire: to dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life." One thing was his focus. An intimate and passionate relationship with God consumed him.

Paul said in Philippians 3:13–14, "But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus." One thing was his focus. The goal of Christlikeness compelled him to move forward in his spiritual journey. In fact, for Paul, everything else was filth compared to this one thing (Phil. 3:8).

Paul instructed Timothy to train himself to be godly. To do so, Timothy would have to avoid all the godless chatter and legalistic principles surrounding him. He had to focus on the one thing of being transformed by God (1 Tim. 4:7–8).

The writer of Hebrews instructs us to throw off sin and everything else that hinders us from running the race that Christ has marked out for us (Heb. 12:1). Runners would not run a race wearing a fur coat or ankle weights. Runners do run a race with streamlined and simple clothing. Everything else is tossed.

The writer of Hebrews issues a call to focus, to fix our eyes only on Christ (Heb. 12:2). One thing. The challenge is to get rid of anything that gets in the way of spiritual transformation.

As a church leader, you partner with God to build the lives of people. If God has given you a clear process for making and maturing disciples, you must focus on this one thing in your church. Then people may run the race without ankle weights.

The Focus of a Builder

Remember, you are a builder.

Imagine sitting down with your family to design a house. You invest months in the designing process. There are so many decisions, so much to think about. You work hard to accommodate the wishes of everyone in the family.

The kids want their rooms a certain way and as far away from each other as possible. The sizes of the rooms are considered, the traffic flow throughout the house, where and how guests will be entertained, the back porch, the bathtub, the placement of the island in the kitchen, whether to have an island in the kitchen or not, and so on. After months of wrestling with the blueprints, you finally have a clear design.

Then you plan how the project will move, how it will progress. You work with a general contractor to set up the schedule of subcontractors who will come to work. They are placed strategically and in order. The project begins with people who will excavate the property and pour the foundation. The project ends with painters and installers. A lot happens in the middle. It is not an easy task.

Next you align all the resources and people to the plan. You ensure everyone knows the process and where he or she fits. You discipline yourself to work only with subcontractors who understand and are committed to the blueprints.

The project begins.

A few weeks into it, your daughter decides she does not like the location of her room. It is too close to the garage, and the garage door opening will wake her in the morning when you leave for work. She wants her room to be on the back of the house.

Your son is thinking of playing the drums. He was not into drums before the plans emerged, but he is now. At least he thinks he is. His room is far too small for a drum set, and your spouse informs you that there is no way the drums are going in the living room.

The project is in jeopardy. Everyone at one time signed off on it, but now other things are stealing focus. Drums, garage doors, life. It all happens.

You had a clear design, a project built to move, and everyone was aligned. Now it could all be lost. The clarity, movement, and alignment will mean nothing if you lose focus.

What do you do?

You will face the same dilemma as a builder of lives and a builder of the kingdom. 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.

What will you do?

According to our research, there is a highly significant relationship between church vitality and the church's focus on the process. 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 are a builder, and focus is mandatory. While clarity, movement, and alignment are essential, they are meaningless without focus. Focus is the commitment to abandon everything that falls outside of the simple ministry process. In this chapter you will be given five essentials to focus. All five are important and emerge from our research findings.

You must eliminate nonessential programs, limit adding more programs, reduce special events, and ensure the process is easy to communicate and simple to understand.

1: Eliminate

Elimination. It is necessary, and it is also difficult.

It is especially difficult for pack rats. Pack rats are a type of rat that continually collects and transports junk. People who collect and hoard meaningless or worthless items are also referred to as pack rats.

If you have ever been in a pack rat's home, you have been shocked at the piles of magazines, newspapers, dishes, and random items. You found it difficult to make your way through the home. You have volunteered to help clean up, but the person insists that all the stuff is needed.

According to research, pack rats most likely suffered a brain lesion that damaged the part of the brain that keeps pack-ratting behavior in check. A study done at the University of Iowa on eighty-six pack rats discovered that each person had suffered some type of brain injury.¹ In other words, elimination is neurologically challenging for a pack rat.

Many churches are pack rats.

Many churches are littered with clutter. Floundering programs and ministries are stored and piled on top of one another. It is hard for people to make their way through the process of spiritual transformation because of the distracting clutter.

While elimination is not neurologically challenging for churches, it is interpersonally and historically challenging. People and history are involved. People lead these programs, and these programs have a history. Church leaders who desire to eliminate programs will inevitably offend the past or some individual.

While eliminating programs is difficult, the data indicates that vibrant church leaders have the discipline to do so. In other words, they are willing to clean out the clutter. Churches that eliminated programs were far more likely to excel in the focus element and be among the vibrant church groups.

We asked vibrant church leaders and comparison church leaders about their commitment to eliminate. We asked them to state their level of agreement with the following statement: "We seek to eliminate programs that do not fit in our process, even if they are good."

Of the vibrant churches, 46 percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement compared to 22 percent of the comparison churches. Vibrant church leaders agreed or strongly agreed more than twice as much as the comparison leaders that they seek to eliminate programs that are not in the process (Figure 1).

Going Google

In chapter 1, you learned that Google's simplicity is dominating the market. People are attracted to their clutter-free search page. While YAHOO! and MSN have a huge cyber-space menu of options, Google has remained simple, and it is working.

As you read that, you may wonder why other search engine companies do not follow suit. Why are they not learning from Google's success and choosing to streamline their search engine Web pages? Why don't they just eliminate?

They can't. They can't stop being pack rats.

Figure 1. Respondents' level of agreement with eliminating programs

Note: SD = Strongly disagree; D = Disagree; MD = Moderately disagree; MA = Moderately agree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly agree

At least that is what Google says. Marissa Mayer oversees the Google home page. She is responsible to keep it simple. She says that "once you have a home page like our competitors, paring it back like Google's is impossible. You have too many stakeholders who feel they should be promoted on the home page."²

So according to Mayer, it would be too painful to get simple. People who have paid money for their services to be on the home page would be upset. Going Google would be interpersonally and historically challenging. Going Google would cause a revolt, a mutiny.

Ouch.

Because of our belief in God's total provision, 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. This focus translates into forsaking programs that are outside of the ministry process.

It is not impossible because church leaders are called by God to be good stewards, and God makes the impossible possible. The bottom line is that elimination is a matter of being a faithful steward.

Stewardship

Since elimination is a matter of stewardship, it is a spiritual issue. Eliminating programs that are not in the simple ministry process is choosing to be wise with the time and resources God has given. It matters to God. And it should matter to us.

Ephesians 5:15–16 says, "Pay careful attention, then, to how you walk—not as unwise people but as wise—making the most of the time because the days are evil."

*Paul had two words he could have used for "time" in this verse: *chronos* and *kairos*. *Chronos* refers to time in general. It is clock time and the root word for chronological. *Kairos* refers to a predetermined, specific amount of time. It is measured, allocated, and fixed.*

*Paul used *kairos*.*

His word choice is huge. He was saying in essence, you have a specific amount of time here in this world. That is it. It is already set. It is fixed. The clock is ticking. Your time is running out. Even now.

So make the most of it. Don't just spend it. Invest it. Be wise. Be wise with the time God has given you. Eliminating programs, as God leads, is choosing to be wise stewards of the time and resources He has given.

Be a wise steward of time. *Keeping programs that are not within the process is bad stewardship of your people's time. Their time is spent attending programs you have identified as being outside your ministry process. If elimination does not occur, people spend hours of time attending programs that are nonessential to your church's ministry process.*

If these nonessential programs remain, your ministry process is diluted. It loses its power. Instead of promoting and discussing only the essential programs in your process, you find yourself promoting everything. The result is that people are scattered among a myriad of programs instead of committed to a focused few.

What is worse, people lose the impact of the essential programs to attend the nonessential ones. People in your church only have a certain amount of discretionary time, and they cannot afford to attend an abundance of weekly programs. If they are constantly invited and challenged to attend these nonessential programs, they miss the essential ones that are designed specifically to move them along the process of transformation.

Refusing to eliminate is also bad stewardship of your leaders' time. Instead of being able to focus on doing a few things with excellence, they lead a lot of programs with mediocrity.

Our observation is that simple churches exhibit excellence to a greater degree than complex churches. In most cases it is not that the leaders of complex churches lack a commitment to excellence. They simply cannot provide it with the number of programs they oversee. Their focus and attention is spread too thin. It is divided too much.

Be a wise steward of money. *Keeping programs that are not within the process is also bad stewardship of resources. Money is spent funding programs that do not enhance the process. Most people do not see all the costs. Costs for staffing and pure ministry are obvious, but hidden costs such as printing and utilities exist as well.*

And this money is important. Do not forget: the money is the tithes and offerings of the people. Instead of spending it on programs outside the process, invest it on programs within your ministry process. Those programs could be done with more excellence, if you gave them the money from the non-essential programs. As programs are eliminated, so are line items in your budget. And this elimination means more resources for your essential programs.

A Case Study from Eric's Church

The early childhood ministry at Christ Fellowship plays a huge role in the weekend services. Preschoolers are taught and parents are freed up to attend the services without distraction. To execute the weekends with excellence, the early childhood ministry had to narrow its focus. Elimination was necessary.

The early childhood ministry had formerly offered a Mothers Morning Out program twice a week. While this program was highly appreciated by mothers in the church, it was not an essential program in the ministry process. It took a tremendous amount of time for the early childhood staff to run the program. Instead of overseeing and recruiting volunteers for only the weekends and midweek program, staff also had to oversee this additional program.

Energy was divided, and the essential programs in the process were suffering. Several times families were turned away during the weekend services because there were not enough volunteers. Unintentionally, Mothers Morning Out competed with the weekend and midweek programs.

It had to be eliminated. This decision was both historically and interpersonally challenging.

Paid child-care workers who made additional income from Mothers Morning Out were frustrated with the decision, as were parents who loved the service. It was not easy. Some people still don't like Eric. Who can blame them?

However, the decision has made the early childhood ministry more effective. They are equipped to handle more kids on the weekend because their attention is less divided. The staff's time is more focused; therefore, the excellence factor is higher. Ultimately, parents appreciate the increased quality of the weekend early childhood ministry.

It may be time to say no to some of your nonessential programs.

Eliminate nonessential programs and then limit adding new ones.

2: Limit Adding

Our research indicates that in order to be focused, you must be careful not to add programs to the ministry process. Doing so would lengthen it; and the longer it is, the fewer people will be able to move through it. It will be an ongoing battle.

It is at Google.

Many people want to add links to their simple home page. As developers produce new services for Google such as maps, alerts, and scholarly papers, there is tremendous pressure to add links for these services to the home page. Marissa Mayer, known as the high priestess of simplicity, says, "I have to say no to a lot of people." Google's research tells them that people only remember seven to ten services on rival sites, so they offer six services on their home page.³

We asked vibrant and comparison church leaders about their reluctance to add programs to their ministry process. We asked them to state their level of agreement with the following statement: "We use our existing weekly programs for special emphases/initiatives instead of adding new programs" (Figure 2).

The percentage of vibrant church leaders (58 percent) who agreed or strongly agreed that their church uses existing programs for special emphases instead of adding new programs was much greater than that of the comparison church leaders (39 percent). In general, vibrant churches are hesitant to add programs. Instead, they funnel needs and emphases through their existing programs. They do so because they view everything through their ministry process, and they do not want to alter it.

Figure 2. Respondents' level of agreement with using existing programs

Note: SD = Strongly disagree; D = Disagree; MD = Moderately disagree; MA = Moderately agree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly agree

While the comparison churches are program-centered, the vibrant churches are process-centered. The comparison churches think about programs, so adding a new one is second nature. The vibrant churches think about the process, so being skeptical of an additional program is second nature. Adding a program would jeopardize their ministry design.

The Solution

So what do church leaders do when God burdens them with a specific need that must be addressed? What do church leaders do when God leads them to emphasize something to the entire church? Simple church leaders seek to meet the need through an existing program while complex church leaders add another program. Simple church leaders funnel special emphases through the existing programs in the process.

For example, if a church decides to emphasize stewardship, they are confronted with the dilemma of when to offer stewardship classes. The complex church leaders tend to add new classes to the church calendar. The entire church would be challenged to come to these classes. Many of these people are already involved in a group or class. Are they expected to come another night of the week or to drop out

of their existing group? While the emphasis began with pure motives, it results in confused and overwhelmed church members.

Simple church leaders approach the stewardship emphases differently. Instead of starting a separate program, they offer the classes through their small group structures. People are given the opportunity to experience the stewardship emphasis in their existing groups, and people who are not yet in a group are challenged to join one. There is no new program, just a new focus.

By funneling the stewardship groups through the existing small-group structure, not only are people being exposed to the stewardship teaching, but they are also progressing through the simple ministry process. People who are not yet plugged into a group are challenged to join one of the new stewardship groups. Since the new groups are a part of one of the essential programs in the process, this simultaneously moves people along in the process.

The discipline to use existing programs allows leaders to provide constant promotion of the process and the programs within it. No time is wasted pushing programs that are outside the simple ministry process. Using existing programs protects the process from becoming too complicated. As the length and complication of the process increases, the number of people who are able to progress through the process decreases.

Simple church leaders have come to realize that less is more.

Less Is More

*It is a counterintuitive statement and concept. Think about it. How is less ever really more? More should be more because *more* means "more." Most church leaders operate under the assumption that more is more. It seems logical to assume that more programs equal more impact. One would reason that churches that offer the most programming would be the most effective.*

Travis Bradshaw from the University of Florida thought so. He thought more would be more. Then he conducted a research project on church growth. He originally hypothesized that churches that offered more programs would grow more than churches that offered fewer programs. His research proved the opposite.

The more programming the churches in Bradshaw's study offered, the less they grew. He placed churches in categories based on the number of programs they offered, and the churches that experienced the highest percentages of growth were the churches that offered fewer programs.⁴

Less really is more.

Less programs mean more focus on the programs offered. Less programs means more excellence. Less programs mean more energy for each program. Less programs mean more money allocated to each program. Less programs mean more people coming to the ones that are offered. Less programs mean more attention from the people in your church.

Less programs means more impact.

While we are advocating that you use existing programs, we are not suggesting that you never begin something new. New is great. New creates energy. New grabs attention. New produces growth. But new does not have to be more. New can be a part of less. There is a key distinction between a new program and a new option.

Options, Not Programs

When we say to limit adding, we are referring to programs. New options are necessary, and new options are not new programs. Add more options, not more programs. A new option is just an expansion of your present programming, and this is a big difference.

You must not miss this important distinction.

Adding new worship services or worship venues is not adding an additional program to your process. It is an expansion of your present programming. It is providing another option for your people. Adding new small groups is not an additional program; it is providing another opportunity for someone to engage in a small group. New small groups or Sunday school classes under the banner of your existing small groups or Sunday school structure is not another program. It is another option.

Are you asking people to come to more programs, or are you giving new options? Giving new options helps engage people who are not involved. It also frees up space, multiplies ministry, and provides energy. New tends to do that.

Think about this from the perspective of people in your church.

If you provide another worship service, would you expect people who are already plugged into a worship service to come to another service? If so, it is another program. If not, it is another option. If you provide small groups on another night, would you expect people already plugged into a group to come to another group? If so, it is another program. If not, then it is another option.

You should be prepared to say no to adding new programs to your process because your focus would be divided. However, you should be eager to add new options because new options help move more people through your simple ministry process.

Eliminate, limit adding programs, and reduce special events.

3: Reduce Special Events

If any athlete is known for focus, it is Michael Jordan.

*In Jordan's latest book, *Driven from Within*, Fred Whitfield tells a fascinating story about Jordan's focus. Fred is a friend of Jordan, and one night Jordan and Fred were going out for the evening. Michael asked Fred if he could borrow a jacket.*

In Fred's closet he had two main types of clothes: Nike and Puma. The Nike outfits came from his relationship with Jordan, and the Puma outfits came from his relationship with Ralph Sampson. Both

athletes had lucrative endorsement deals with those respective companies: Jordan with Nike and Sampson with Puma.

Fred recalls that Jordan walked into the living room and laid all of the Puma gear on the floor. Jordan then went to the kitchen, grabbed a butcher knife, and returned to the living room. He proceeded to destroy all of the Puma clothes with the knife. He literally cut them to shreds, picked up the scraps, and carried everything to the dumpster.

Jordan came back inside and told Fred, "Don't ever let me see you in anything other than Nike. You can't ride the fence."⁵

That is good advice.

You cannot ride the fence. You must be focused. After you have designed your simple ministry process, all of your programming focus should go to executing the process. Our research indicates you should reduce the number of special events you produce and promote as a church.

Perhaps it is time to pull out the knife—figuratively speaking, of course.

We asked vibrant and comparison church leaders about their use of special events and conferences. We asked them to state their level of agreement with the following statement: "We limit the number of conferences and special events that we do as a church" (Figure 3).

Of the vibrant churches, 25 percent strongly agreed with this statement, while 6.0 percent of the comparison churches strongly agreed with this statement. The percentage of vibrant church leaders (57 percent) who agreed or strongly agreed that their church limits the number of conferences and special events they do as a church was much greater than that of the comparison church leaders (38 percent).

Figure 3. Respondents' level of agreement with limiting special events

Note: SD = Strongly disagree; D = Disagree; MD = Moderately disagree; MA = Moderately agree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly agree

In general, simple churches are so focused on their ministry process that there is little time for extra events. Special events would get in the way. They would distract.

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 events is a challenge. Some special events can be beneficial to the church if they are used strategically. Following are three suggestions in regard to special events based on our observations of simple churches.

Funnel the Event into an Existing Program

Often a special event is planned to address a spiritual need in people's lives. And the solution offered for the need is an event. You have seen that happen. Events have become a way for leaders to address an issue quickly, and with little commitment. Providing an event is easier than walking with people through a situation.

In most cases the need can be better met through existing programming instead of a special event. And the ministry continues. It is more ongoing. Events are finished after the building is locked.

Think about your consultation with First Church and Cross Church (chapter 2). Both churches were burdened for marriages in their church, and rightly so. Both churches discovered curriculum they felt would impact families. It was the same curriculum.

First Church offered a two-day marriage seminar at their church. They promoted it heavily and had a low number of attendees. At the same time, their weekly programs were not a priority. Everything was about the seminar.

Cross Church acted differently. They offered numerous short-term small groups under the banner of their existing small-groups ministry. The same content was offered in conjunction with their simple ministry process. People received the teaching and at the same time were plugged into an essential program within the process.

At First Church, the seminar came and went. At Cross Church, the small groups have the option to continue. Relationships are still developing.

Same burden. Same content. Different approach. Different result.

Combine the Event with an Existing Program

In some situations, combining the special event with an existing program is more effective. Stacking a special event on top of an existing program gives new energy to the program. Instead of promoting and planning a special event and the existing program separately, the two complement each other. They are planned and promoted together.

Combining the event with an existing program also brings attention to the essential program. More people are invited and exposed to the essential program. This increases the likelihood that they will return. Following are some examples of combinations we have observed:

***The traditional "dinner on the grounds"** is a prime example of stacking a special event on top of an essential program. Instead of having a dinner for the entire church on a separate occasion as a stand-alone event, the dinner on the grounds is combined with the worship service. Traditionally, it is a big day. People are invited to stay after church for dinner, and during this time relationships are developed.*

Christmas services are being combined with weekend worship services to maximize the potential of the holiday season. Instead of having a separate Christmas Eve or Christmas Day service in addition to a regular weekend service, churches have offered one special Christmas service multiple times over several days. By doing so, more people are exposed to a typical weekend service. In addition, all energy and publicity are focused on the one service that is offered multiple times.

Youth events are being combined with the entry-level program in youth ministry. Instead of having a fun event on a different night, youth ministries have combined the event with their regular entry-level program. Attention and work are focused on the same event/program, and new students are more likely to return because they have been exposed to the weekly program.

Children's harvest parties are being combined with the Saturday night worship service at several churches. Families are invited to stay for the Saturday evening service at the conclusion of the harvest party. The harvest party becomes a clear bridge to the worship service instead of just an event at a different time.

Use the Special Event Strategically

If the event cannot be funneled into or combined with an existing program, then it must be placed strategically along the simple process. There must be a "now what?" at the end of each event. A "now what?" means people are able to plug into an essential program at the conclusion of the event. The event should be used to move people to an essential program in the process.

For example, imagine that a church provides a parenting seminar. They decide to have a clear "now what?" at the conclusion of the seminar. They are prepared to offer new parenting groups to participants. Before people leave the event, they are encouraged to sign up for a group.

As you are eliminating, reducing, and limiting additional programs, you must continually bring attention to the simple ministry process. Therefore, you must be sure your process is easily communicated and understood.

4: Easily Communicated

Bringing focus to a church is not easy. A tension exists, a tension that must be held in balance.

On the one hand, the simple process will be understood more as you eliminate, use existing programs, and reduce special events. As you do these things, people will know you are serious. For some people the process will not be grasped until these bold moves are made. These bold moves will get attention, force discussion, and lead to understanding.

On the other hand, the process must be understood as these changes are made. If key leaders do not grasp the process in the midst of change, division is certain. As programs are eliminated and special events reduced, you must point people to the simple process. You must communicate.

In one sense the process will be understood more as these moves are made. In another sense the process must be understood before these moves are made. As a church leader, you must wrestle with this tension.

Since understanding is so critical, you must be comfortable articulating your process. As you eliminate and reduce special events, you will need to be constantly communicating the simple ministry process. To keep the church focused, you must regularly remind people.

According to our research, it is vital that your process be easy to communicate.

You must feel right as you say it. You must be able to preach it with conviction. The process must be part of who you are. If the ministry process is not easy to communicate, it will not be understood.

We asked vibrant and comparison church leaders to evaluate how easily they explain their ministry process. We asked them to state their level of agreement with the following statement: "Our process is easy to communicate" (Figure 4).

Of the vibrant churches, 56 percent strongly agreed or agreed with the statement compared to 24 percent of the comparison churches. Vibrant church leaders agreed or strongly agreed more than twice as much as the comparison leaders that their process is easy to communicate.

Simple church leaders are able to articulate their process, while complex churches struggle to do so. 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.

Key 5: Simple to Understand

According to our data, your process must be simple to understand. 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. People are incapable of focusing on something they do not understand. Understanding leads to focus and commitment.

Figure 4. Respondents' level of agreement with the process being easy to communicate

Note: SD = Strongly disagree; D = Disagree; MD = Moderately disagree; MA = Moderately agree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly agree

People within a church are able to move through the process of spiritual transformation when they truly get it. So as a church leader, you must make sure your process can stick in the minds of your people. People should be able to nod their heads when they hear it.

It is vital that your process be understood because you will be saying no to everything else. No is easier to accept when the reasoning is clear. If people understand the commitment to the simple process, they will be more likely to embrace the decisions that accompany such focus.

We asked vibrant and comparison church leaders to evaluate how simple it is for people to understand their ministry process. We asked them to state their level of agreement with the following statement: "We have made our process simple for people to understand."

Of the vibrant churches, 50 percent strongly agreed or agreed compared to 24 percent of the comparison churches. Vibrant church leaders agreed or strongly agreed more than twice as much as the comparison leaders that they have made their process simple to understand (Figure 5).

Simple church leaders ensure the people in the church can understand their process. Making your process understandable requires simple language and brevity.

Choose simple language. Any word that has to be parsed or explained should not be used to describe your process. The description of your ministry process must be easy to understand. Carefully select the words and phrases.

Figure 5. Respondents' level of agreement with process being understandable

Note: SD = Strongly disagree; D = Disagree; MD = Moderately disagree; MA = Moderately agree; A = Agree; SA = Strongly agree

Be brief. The amount of information people are confronted with today is overwhelming. And it is increasing. It has been estimated that the world produced five exabytes of information in 2002. That is the same amount of information produced from the beginning of time through the year 2000.⁶

Obviously most of the information presented to people does not stick. We are on information overload. So be sure the description of your ministry process is brief. Brochures and written documentation about your process must be short, assuming you want people to read it. If multiple pages are needed to explain your process, go back to the drawing board.

Eliminate. Reduce. Limit additions. All will lead to greater focus. In the midst of the refocusing, your process must be communicated and understood.

Simple churches are focused. They say no to almost everything.

Just like great organizations.

Focus and Greatness

Great organizations are focused. They are good at saying no.

Apple, the designers and producers of the iPod and iMac, excel in simplicity because they are so focused. Steve Jobs, the leader of the organization, said he is "as proud of the things they have not done as he is of the things they have done."⁷

Did you catch that?

He is excited that Apple has said no. It has reaped great benefits.

Procter & Gamble is the largest manufacturer of household products in the United States. In the late 1990s P&G committed to simplicity. They felt they had become too complex. They decided to eliminate, to streamline. From 1996 to 1998 alone, they reduced the number of products by 20 percent. They sold some product lines to other companies and completely buried others.⁸

They began to say no a lot. And they accomplished more with less. Everyone knew that eliminating products would reduce costs, but it also bolstered sales. Market share increased by five points. Reducing clutter produced big results.⁹

When Jack Welch became the CEO of General Electric, he made a bold statement. GE would be number one or number two in every market, or they would eliminate that part of the business. They would focus only where they could be the best. They would say no to everything else.¹⁰

Just like great organizations, simple churches are focused. They say no.

Are you ready to say no?

Are you committed to staying focused on the simple ministry process?

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What programs are nonessential in our ministry process?*
- 2. What prevents us from eliminating?*
- 3. How could our approach to special events be altered?*
- 4. Why is saying no difficult in ministry?*
- 5. Will the majority of our people understand our ministry process *before* focus takes place, *as* focus is taking place, or *after* focus has occurred?*
- 6. As a steward of people's time and money, what is God speaking to me about?¹*

¹ Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2011).