Simple Church in a Post-COVID World

Thom Rainer's short follow-up to Simple Church, and what it adds to our work

> *"The simple church model without the outward focus of the Great Commission is like bones without life."*
>
> Thom S. Rainer, *Simple Church in a Post-COVID World*

The book in brief

Rainer wrote this short book in 2021, fourteen years after he and Eric Geiger published *Simple Church*. He retells how it began, in Geiger's research on more than 400 churches, restates the four elements (clarity, movement, alignment and focus) and argues the pandemic made the model more urgent. Churches regathered with 20 to 70 percent fewer people and fewer volunteers. "COVID was not an interruption; it was a disruption." He reminds readers that the years before 2020 weren't "the good old days" either: by his team's estimates, most North American churches were already declining, and more than nine in ten pastors now say their church needs revitalization. Cultural Christians are disappearing from the pews.

What the book adds to *Simple Church*

The path as minimum expectations

Rainer's sample statement is four words: **Gather. Connect. Go. Give.** Gather in worship every week, connect in a small group, go by serving in at least one ministry a year, and give faithfully. The words describe the least a member should do, and people are free to do more. The new members class teaches them, and the whole church can repeat them.

Measure all four

"What gets measured in the church gets attention." Most churches count worship attendance and giving. Rainer says to count group attendance and ministry involvement too, even by hand each quarter, and report all four.

Don't start with focus

Leaders tend to jump straight to cutting things. Rainer says to align first, so it's clear what doesn't fit; in one church he coached, about 40 percent of activities didn't. Our plan already works in this order, with ministry fits due September 30, 2027 and the inventory after.

Put the Great Commission in every step

The book's main correction: Rainer admits he and Geiger assumed churches would turn outward on their own, and many didn't. "When evangelism is neglected, discipleship is impossible," because there's nobody new to disciple.

STEP	RAINER'S OUTWARD-FACING EXAMPLE
Gather	Invite cards members carry and hand out; an "Invite Your One" Sunday when everyone invites one person.
Connect	Groups that invite. Rainer grew his own group by personal invitations and a small Facebook ad aimed at one ZIP code.
Go	Pray & Go: members pray outside homes and leave a door hanger offering prayer. One Georgia church of 160 prayed for 3,700 homes in three years and saw more than 60 people come to Christ.
Give	Budget money to reach the local community and increase it every year. In one informal survey, nearly half of churches budgeted nothing for it.

How it could serve The Way Ahead

1. **Ask where evangelism lives on our path.** Where does reaching people outside the church show up in Learn, Love, Live and Lead? Session 3 should test any draft path against the Great Commission, as the Warren summary also urged.
2. **Decide whether our path names expectations.** His four words tell a member plainly what's expected. Ours describe stages of growth. Either can work, but we should choose on purpose and teach it in the new members class.
3. **Count what we say we value.** We already track attendance and giving. Add the share of adults in a Life Group and the share serving somewhere, and report all four to the LBA each quarter.
4. **Let the March 20 prayer drive become a habit.** Pray & Go is close to what we've planned for the five towns. It could become a regular outing, with door hangers pointing to pathwaywes.com for prayer requests.
5. **Give outreach a line in the budget.** When the 2028–29 budget is built in spring 2028, include money set aside to reach the five towns, and plan to raise it each year.

Reading with discernment

A vision statement and a path aren't the same thing. Rainer calls "Gather. Connect. Go. Give." both a vision statement and a discipleship process. Our plan keeps them separate: the vision describes where God may be leading Pathway, and the path describes how a person grows here.

Minimum expectations need a Wesleyan frame. Four habits can harden into a checklist. We'd teach them as means of grace, ordinary ways the Spirit forms a heart that loves God and neighbor.

Urgency shouldn't rush discernment. "Change or die" is real pressure, but we've chosen six months of prayer and listening. Rainer also urges wisdom and wise counsel.

TALK IT THROUGH

1. What did the pandemic years change at Pathway, and what did they reveal that was already true?
2. If a newcomer asked, "What does Pathway expect of its members?", what would we say today?
3. Who in our five towns has drifted from church? How could we pray for them, street by street?

Source: Thom S. Rainer, *Simple Church in a Post-COVID World* (Church Answers, 2021). Figures are the author's estimates.