

## **How Bill Hybels and Andy Stanley Plan Weekend Services**

This is the unabridged transcript of the conversation Bill Hybels and Andy Stanley shared on the topic of weekend service planning.

The setting was a recent gathering of church leaders in the town of Bracknell, England.

### **BILL**

You probably can't really peg high enough just how important every single weekend is.

It is absolutely the most important gathering of your week, and if it rocks everything else can follow in the jetstream of that.

But man, if you get lazy or complacent with weekends, nothing deflates a church quicker, than a congregation who goes, "Oh, here we go, just another normal weekend.

No weekend should be normal.

### **ANDY**

You need to start by looking at your entire year as a series of blocks. Think of rhythms, seasons, special events.

For example around May and June we'll often do relationship types of stuff, that time of the year, because it's Mother's Day, Father's Day.

Summer is a little random.

Fall we do spiritual growth; people are coming back to school so we look for a spiritual growth series.

Then it's a little random.

Then generally it's ramping up for Christmas.

First of the year I try to do something super highly practical, you know, taking responsibility for your life. It's just super practical. So again, people who don't normally come are going to be there in January.

Then I'm going to do a book of the bible. I'll teach through a book of the bible. I'll do that leading up to Easter. I don't know why. It's just the time we felt.

So we'll even look at those kinds of things. We're not always consistent with that.

But what it does for us in the planning, is that when we have ideas we have places to hang those ideas throughout the year. I have a relationship idea; well let's just go ahead and write it in this part of the calendar.

That's not necessarily where we have to do it, but for me I have peace of mind that there are some ideas on the calendar in some way. Are you the same way? Even if I don't have an outline, at least I have some idea of what's coming.

And then, because we're working that far ahead, I look at some of our other communicators, and I know they have leanings on some of those topics I can start to schedule them in as well.

So that's the big picture. Then there's more meetings where we develop specific series and specific topics, and I could go on and on about that.

**BILL**

Ya, we would do something very similar there.

I'll handle just the tighter process.

I have a creative team. We just call them the arts team, or the creative arts team. And I meet with them for two and a half hours every single week.

**ANDY**

You mean, just when you're preaching? Or every single week?

**BILL**

Every week, preaching or not preaching.

And I do this as a value, because I feel like we've got the teaching part down pretty good...It's rarely the teaching in our church that's the variable, it's the programmatical part. And I want to be in the room with the people who are helping us create the weekend experience. I want to set the values with them, I want to hear their ideas, I want to bless ideas that really feel cutting edge to me, I want to nix the ones that are over the line, that are going to put us back.

So it's just a decision I make. I've got "x" number of hours in my week that I can give to "x" number of initiatives, ministries, management; I want to be with the arts. I want to hear them, shape them, excite them.

And I honestly don't understand pastors who don't meet with their artists. I don't get it. They are 50% of what you do, and if the weekend experience is going to be so powerfully determinative of what you do with your church, I would think you would want to be in that meeting so you can figure out who are the people who are creating the best services so you can develop them more, who's not adding anything to the party; they have to work somewhere else.

But man, I'm all over that. And I feel that's a very important role of mine.

And we like to get out three or four weeks ahead. (To Andy) You probably like to get out even further than that.

## **ANDY**

I meet every week with our service programming directors, which are the people who are putting our services together. But we're doing the same services at all of our campuses, so it's highly creative. I mean, I'm a better preacher because of that group.

We have content meetings and we have concept meetings. A content meeting is, "Hey I'm thinking about doing this series on, whatever the topic is; say 'marriage'." So let's get some marriage experts. I'm looking for content. I'm not looking for creative ideas. Let's talk about content.

Then I've got this stack of content.

Then I'll have another meeting; the concept meeting, where I want all the creative people. I don't want any content; I've got the content. Here's the subject; how do we package it. Because, I'm guessing, where Bill and I are now in a state of life, we preach so many messages and we've taught so many passages, we need to repeat some passages and we need to repeat some content.

And as long as you re-package it, and as long as you tweak the angle, you can repeat content. Content needs to be repeated.

So now I'm sitting with a group of people saying, "Here's the content, here's the idea, what's the angle, what's the packaging, what does this bring to mind, what's the visual; what's the visual umbrella?"

That's two very different groups of people, and generally I'll have that meeting for any series I do. Always the second one, sometimes the first one, depending; sometimes I've got so much content I really don't want to get a lot of input from other people. But I have a weekly meeting with our arts people to talk about what's coming up, and that's even when I'm not preaching I meet with them. I just feel I get a better ideas and better perspective on sermon creation.

**BILL**

I love my team, I hold them in extremely high regard. But you would be astonished at how many times when I come in to those meetings and they tell me what they're thinking about for the next few weeks, I'll say, "That bores me, gang. You worked seven days, and we're going to do four worship songs, two prayers and out?"

I can still play guitar," I always warn them. "I can still play guitar. I can do that. So what's new? What are they going to experience this weekend that's going to come out of left field or right field that there's going to be a new way of learning that there's going to be a new creative idea that's going to land because it's fresh."

You see?

In other words, it's a fallacy to think that creative people are always on the edge of creating. A lot of time you have to light a fire under the creative people, saying, "That's not creative enough. Now, I'll come back in two days and I have to hear some better ideas than this."

I do this.

**ANDY**

One of the things I learned years and years ago to help our creative people is this. They would always say, "What's the message about?" or "What's the series about?"

So I'd give them outlines, or I'd give them bottom lines. But they'd come back with this lame stuff; it was too much of a giveaway.

But then I discovered, I'd say, "I'm not going to tell you what the bottom line is. Let me tell you the tension I want you to help me create."

I'm telling you, that was a game changer.

Because, "I don't want you to communicate the bottom line. Here's what I want people to feel when I get up. Here's the dilemma, here's the tension, here's the mystery, here's the question. Now I want you to put all your creative eggs in the basket of creating drama, tension, it can be funny, I don't care. But you help me create the tension, I'll deliver the bottom line."

And that helped send them on a much better path in terms of harnessing and focusing their creativity, in terms of music, video or whatever they might be creating.

### **BILL**

I am constantly pushing my team. They'll say, "Here's what the first 30 minutes of the service is going to be about."

And I'll say, "Great. There's nothing visual. There's no motion. There's no dance. There's no unusual instrumentation. There's nothing that's going to take my breath away. Why isn't there?"

And they'll go, "Well, you know, we were just going to..."

"That's not good enough. "

So, one week I was going to preach on Psalm 51; the great confession Psalm. And I had a lot to say about it, because I had done a lot of sinning...and I had spent some time in Psalm 51. And I had felt fresh forgiveness.

So I announced that, like, three weeks in advance. And the closer we got to it I could tell, "This is just going to be like a normal service," to my arts people.

And so I stopped just goading them and said, "Gang, you gotta listen; you gotta listen to me here. I had a 'washed clean' experience with God recently. And it was so dramatic to me. I want many thousands of people bowled over by the fact that we can be washed clean. So help me, would you? Help me, give me your best ideas."

So a couple of days later one of our artists calls me and he goes, "I think I got one."

And long story short, he had a huge acrylic see-through board, 20 feet wide. And while we read passages about how we can foul up, he put paint on this acrylic. All kinds of bold coloured paint. But it's all disorganized. It was representing sin and iniquity and all the terrible things we can get caught up in.

And music was playing under it as this was going on.

And then there was a turn and we read some scripture. And we started playing the old hymn, "What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! What can make me whole again?"

And we started ramping that song up. And when it hit about the right part, this guy had a paint diffuser substance, or whatever it was, and squirted it on top of this acrylic deal. And you could watch that solution break down all of the pigments in the paint that was on the acrylic board.

And we're singing, "Oh precious is the flow that makes me white as snow," while all of these scars and colours are being washed clean by this solvent that comes down.

By the end of the song that whole acrylic thing was spotless!

### **ANDY**

Now, can I pause here?

(To gathered leaders) Why aren't you writing this down? I'm writing this down!

(To Bill) The rest of them can just sit here and look at you, but keep going. This is good.

### **BILL**

My point in this is, when we finished that part, and then I preached from Psalm 51;

**ANDY**

Wooooo!

**BILL**

I'm not kidding you, by the end of that service, there wasn't a dry eye in the place. And we did the closing song, and it was something about being washed clean, and we had church! We met God that day!

Now, my point in this is, pastors, you have to light a fire under your artists. You've got to get more out of them. You have to push them and make them want more than they're going to want to want.

And as you do that you'll find out who are your best contributors and who is never coming to the table with a fresh idea, and then those people need to make a contribution some other place.

But you eventually cultivate a team of people and you go, "Man, these people come to the table every week with something awesome.

And then you connect great preaching with that, and good leadership, church can rock and roll.

**ANDY**

Now, let me comment on that.

What Bill said earlier is a great illustration of what I was trying to say. He kept throwing out this general idea, but then he said, "I had an encounter with God," and it became emotional at that point.

**BILL**

Right.

**ANDY**

And what he did is he gave them the angle, he gave them the emotion of the message. And once he gave the artist the emotion of the message, artists can run with it. Because artists are emotional.

The more creative a person is, the more emotion; that fuels them.

So I would guess that when Bill started talking about his own experience and the emotion behind that, that just supercharged the creative person, whoever came up with that idea.

That is a powerful visual; a powerful, powerful thing.

Some of you have the opposite problem; you're surrounded by creative people, and you won't take a chance.

The creative people are pushing you. They're saying, "Hey, while you're preaching I want to paint!" And you're all like "Aaaaah, aaaaah"

They're saying, "We have an idea for a visual aid!"

And you're saying, "Ah, I don't do visual aids."

Some of you just need to step out of your comfort zones and allow your creative people to drag you into a world that will have much broader appeal. And you will get used to it.

Take some chances. It seems disruptive to you, but that's because you've been doing it the same way year after year after year, so it can work both ways. We need to sometimes direct them, and at other times we need to allow them to direct us.