

## Rivers, Floods, and Disney

By Tim Elmore

Rivers and floods are both bodies of water. Floods often damage. Rivers are useful in many ways. The difference? Focus. Leaders must channel people, time, and money toward one focused vision.

I have a picture indelibly etched in my memory. When I was a kid I remember a horrifying flood that swept through a town not far from where we lived. I watched the TV intently as reporters showed the expanding body of murky water spilling through streets, over yards, and into houses, restaurants, and stores. It seemed to demolish everything in its path. In my mind I can still see people standing on top of their cars, weeping as they saw their homes fold and fall.

What started as a simple rainstorm ended up filling the nearby rivers and unmercifully overflowing into neighborhoods and strip malls. I remember thinking: *How can a simple thing such as water do so much damage?*

Some of my friends took awhile to recover from the flood. One of them

didn't want anything to do with water for a year. For him, a large body of water was a frightening thing.

Do you remember watching CNN or Fox News as Hurricane Katrina gushed through New Orleans and other southern cities indiscriminately last year? Tens of thousands of people were displaced by the ravaging tide. I live in Atlanta, and we're still helping folks get back on their feet, even today—all because of a flood. Water without a border is dangerous.

This is a picture of an important leadership truth. Many ministries begin with great focus, like a river. The leaders possess an idea they want to implement. In their zeal to grow, they begin to expand far beyond the boundaries of their initial vision. This is often where organizations begin to fail. If we're good at making widgets, they reason, why not make other products as well? Soon—in the name of meeting needs, or generating revenue, or just plain growth—they become a flood instead of a river. They lose all focus and go in every direction.

Take IBM for instance—in the beginning, when IBM focused on mainframe computers, the company made a ton of money. By the 1980s IBM got

into everything and barely broke even. In 1991 IBM was making more products than ever. The result? In 1992 they lost several billion dollars. It seems logical that enlarging product lines would mean greater profit, but it's actually the other way around. Staying focused on your central vision and strength is the key to growth. The airline industry is a good example. People Express was launched as an airline that focused on no-frills, low-cost flights. When it began to succeed, management decided to expand beyond that vision. They started providing first class seats, food, and other extras. Profits dropped...in fact, the airline went out of business. Southwest Airlines entered the industry with a similar vision—but it stuck to its strengths, and for years it's been the only profitable airline in the business.

A clear focus harnesses energy. People lose energy when their direction in life is fuzzy. They get energized when they catch a clear vision. Just over 50 years ago Walt Disney met with his inner circle and told them he wanted to build a place called Disneyland. It would be known as the “happiest place on earth.” He began to storyboard his dream so clearly in pictures that his team got excited. “Who are you gonna get to build it?” one man asked.

“I already know who I want to build it,” Walt responded. “Find me the man who helped put the U.S. Navy back in the Pacific Ocean after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I figure he can do it.”

It didn't take Walt's team long to identify this man. His name was Joe Fowler. Retired Admiral Joe Fowler. At 57, Joe decided to retire from the Navy and relax for his remaining years. When Disney showed up at his door and challenged him to build Disney's theme park, Joe laughed. “You don't understand. I'm retired. I'm through.” Disney could tell getting Joe on board would take some work. So he began to storyboard again. He placed pictures up on the wall and spoke in great detail of how the park would feel, look, smell, sound, and even taste. When he got through casting his vision—Joe bought in. He came out of retirement and oversaw the construction of Disneyland.

Almost 20 years later, when Fowler was in his 70s, the Disney team convinced him to come out of retirement again—to supervise the building of Walt Disney World. The story continues. When Epcot was built in Orlando, as a separate Disney theme park, the Walt Disney Company once

again returned to Joe Fowler. He was 87 years old. When they asked him to implement this vision, he sighed again: “You don’t understand. I’m retired. I’m through.” But they’d have nothing to do with that nonsense. Joe was the man. And once again, he lit up when they communicated their clear, focused vision for Epcot. Joe stepped out of retirement for the third time and oversaw the project.

What a picture of the energy that comes with clear, focused vision. In fact, Joe’s favorite phrase, which once was “I’m retired. I’m through,” was changed to “You don’t have to die till you want to.” I often wonder how much energy is bottled up inside people and never released because they never learn to focus or they just plain fail to tap into a clear vision.

How ironic this is! My friend Mike Kendrick taught me why this principle works. It works for one simple reason: *What you focus on expands*. Read that sentence again. Now think about it. If I tell you to focus on finding Toyota Camry’s on the road, you’ll notice those cars everywhere. Why? Because what you focus on expands. So the goal of a leader is to focus, not expand. Clarify the vision. Focus your people, time, energy, and

resources. Expansion is a byproduct of a focus that believes “just because you *can* doesn’t mean you *should*.” Intensify, don’t diversify.

In order to accomplish this focus, it’s important to zero in on a handful of words; in fact, maybe just one word (or concept) that becomes your own. It describes your identity or your vision. Some of the best-selling products on the market “own” such words. Crest toothpaste owns the word *cavities*. FedEx owns the word *overnight*. Volvo owns the words *automobile safety*. As they focus their energy on this single concept—they go deeper and expand like a river, always moving in one direction. Being a river is about clear vision and sharp focus.

### **A Look at the Book**

Here’s the challenge. Ask yourself: What’s our word? Ask outsiders what word comes to their minds when they think of your organization. If you’re going to be a river, you must take the water you have and channel it. The water represents people, time, energy, and resources.

Check out Proverbs 29:18: “Where there is no vision the people are unrestrained; but happy is he who keeps the Law.” What does this passage imply about the benefit of a clear vision?

Now read what Jesus taught in Matthew 6:22-24. He talks about making your eye single. Compare this passage to Philippians 3:13-14. The Apostle Paul seems to understand this idea of rivers and floods, too. What do we learn from both of these passages?

### **Assessing Yourself**

Someone once said: “If the devil cannot make you bad, he’ll make you busy.” Consider your answers to the following questions. Be candid.

How many activities are you trying to perform?

How thin are you spread?

How about your organization?

Are you more like a flood or a river?

How might you redirect energy in order to be more productive?

What’s your vision?

What’s your word?

**Exercise**

Discuss the word that best describes your church's vision. What's your focus? Do you and your leadership team agree on what your word is? Would your church members agree with you?

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