

# Skimming – part one

By Pete Scazzero

After 20 years as senior pastor, I finally had to admit I'd been "skimming" in my leadership. Skimming is the way many of us cope with multiple demands, constant pressure, and overloaded schedules. We cover a lot of ground superficially without being fully engaged.

Like skimming a book, this can produce an impression that everything is covered, but in reality, you aren't completely there.

How do you know when you're skimming?

- You go from meeting to meeting without awareness of God.
- You say "yes" to new commitments and expansions without properly following through on what you are already doing.
- It is Friday and you realize you do not have enough time to allow the truth of what you are preaching to transform your own walk with Christ.
- You avoid difficult decisions and truth because someone will be upset.
- You muddle your way through a meeting because you have not clearly determined your goals and agenda.
- You're engaged in a pastoral phone call or visit – resentfully.
- You cannot stop thinking about the unfinished work at church when you are with your family.
- You are too busy to reflect on your own heart or cultivate your own personal relationship with Jesus Christ.
- You are not investing in your own personal growth and marriage.
- You measure your success based on what other people say rather than your own internal values before God.

Many times skimming is a "defensive mechanism" of denial that blocks us from growing up spiritually and emotionally. It's a way of avoiding aspects of ministry that stir up anxiety or suggest pain. It can work for a while, but eventually it catches up with us, and there's a price to pay. Here's how it caught up with me and forced me to confront my own skimming.

For years our church board, in their annual review of my role, asked how I enjoyed my position as senior pastor. "I love preaching, teaching, casting vision, and discipling people," I replied. "But God just didn't gift me to do administration or run the organization. It's frustrating."

For years I attempted to find ways (along with our board) to provide administrative leadership alongside my role as the visionary, senior leader. As our church grew, we

tried different staff configurations – hiring from inside, hiring from outside, dividing the job between different people. Each time we hit a wall. Nothing seemed to work long-term.

Yet I continued to avoid making personnel decisions, managing staff and key volunteers, writing job descriptions, taking time to plan for meetings, or following through on project details.

During this 20-year period, I saw clearly things that needed to be done, but I wanted someone else to do it. “That’s all administration,” I told myself. “That’s something that someone else should do. It’s just not me.”

In hindsight I can now see two factors that hindered me.

*I didn’t trust myself.* Throughout my ministry I had plenty of administrative failures. And I had mixed emotions about trying again. Plus, I was told by consultants, other pastors, even my wife: “You don’t have those gifts, so play to your strengths and hire to your weaknesses.” “Spend your time in the Word and prayer. Let others run the day-to-day operation.” This reinforced my mental block that I couldn’t do it.

*I was a coward.* Each time I saw what needed to be done, I realized I had fear of getting into the nitty-gritty. Changes in leadership were needed. A few key people were not properly slotted. Others weren’t doing their roles well. This was now having an increasing impact on the larger church.

I had made difficult decisions prior to this, but now I was skimming, trying to stay above the fray, safely above the “administrative” issues that were bogging us down. Truth be told, I was afraid of being misunderstood, losing friendships, having people leave the church, halting our momentum.

I complained, got angry, blamed, sulked. But I did nothing.

### **Finding personal integrity – finally**

A number of events finally converged to break me out of this gridlock.

First, I reached a point of utter frustration. The inner workings of our staff were not reflecting the message I was preaching. I could no longer preach a way of life that our church leadership was not living.

Around this time, my wife, Geri, also spoke up: “Pete, I think the issue is courage, your courage. I’m not blaming you. It’s hard to make the kind of changes needed. All I know is that you are in the position to do it, but you aren’t. You are not enforcing our values of emotionally healthy spirituality with the staff to the degree that is needed. You’re angry

and resentful. We have a great church, but . . .”

She paused and then dropped the bombshell.

“I think this is about you. You may not have what it takes to do what needs to be done. Maybe your time is up and someone else needs to step in and lead.”

I was exposed. While her words hurt, I knew there was truth in them. I spent the next day alone with God and my journal.

Yes, I wanted someone else to come in and “get the house in order,” to do the dirty work of hiring, firing, redirecting, and leading the church through the painful changes before us.

But it now was very clear. It was time to stop skimming, to stop trying to lead at a distance, to stop just casting vision, and to take steps to implement it. I admitted the truth: the greatest deterrent to New Life Fellowship Church becoming what God meant to be was me, not any other person or factor.

Two weeks later I became the executive pastor, determined to learn the job. For the next year, I would serve under the senior pastor – me!

I cancelled speaking engagements outside New Life, said “no” to a potential book contract, and signed up for a round of excellent counseling to sort through my own “beneath the iceberg” blockages that were in the way. I preached less, and we moved more deliberately to a teaching team.

Over the next year I learned that the skills for doing the executive work of an organization are not hard to learn. The real difficulty was making the time, thinking carefully “before the Lord,” summoning the courage to have difficult conversations, and following all the way through. No longer skimming, I was now stepping into the messy, painful truth that would set both me and New Life free.

As “not skimming” in my leadership became a major learning curve for me, I began to ponder how much skimming was happening in other areas of my life. In the next issue, I’ll share what I learned from skimming in four critical areas: with God, with myself, in marriage, and in leadership.