

LeaderLesson 14: Autopsy of a Deceased Church

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April 24, 2013

I was their church consultant in 2003. The church's peak attendance was 750 in 1975. By the time I got there the attendance had fallen to an average of 83. The large sanctuary seemed to swallow the relatively small crowd on Sunday morning.

The reality was that most of the members did not want me there. They were not about to pay a consultant to tell them what was wrong with their church. Only when a benevolent member offered to foot my entire bill did the congregation grudgingly agree to retain me.

I worked with the church for three weeks. The problems were obvious; the solutions were difficult.

On my last day, the benefactor walked me to my rental car. "What do you think, Thom?" he asked. He could see the uncertainty in my expression, so he clarified. "How long can our church survive?" I paused for a moment, and then offered the bad news. "I believe the church will close its doors in five years."

I was wrong. The church closed just a few weeks ago. Like many dying churches, it held on to life tenaciously. This church lasted ten years after my terminal diagnosis.

My friend from the church called to tell me the news. I took no pleasure in discovering that not only was my diagnosis correct, I had mostly gotten right all the signs of the impending death of the church. Together my friend and I reviewed the past ten years. I think we were able to piece together a fairly accurate autopsy. Here are eleven things I learned.

1. The church refused to look like the community. The community began a transition toward a lower socioeconomic class thirty years ago, but the church members had no desire to reach the new residents. The congregation thus became an island of middle-class members in a sea of lower-class residents.
2. The church had no community-focused ministries. This part of the autopsy may seem to be stating the obvious, but I wanted to be certain. My friend affirmed my suspicions. There was no attempt to reach the community.
3. Members became more focused on memorials. Do not hear my statement as a criticism of memorials. Indeed, I recently funded a memorial in memory of my late grandson. The memorials at the church were chairs, tables, rooms, and other places where a neat plaque could be placed. The point is that the memorials became an obsession at the church. More and more emphasis was placed on the past.
4. The percentage of the budget for members' needs kept increasing. At the church's death, the percentage was over 98 percent.
5. There were no evangelistic emphases. When a church loses its passion to reach the lost, the congregation begins to die.

6. The members had more and more arguments about what they wanted. As the church continued to decline toward death, the inward focus of the members turned caustic.
7. Arguments were more frequent; business meetings became more acrimonious.
8. With few exceptions, pastoral tenure grew shorter and shorter. The church had seven pastors in its final ten years. The last three pastors were bi-vocational. All of the seven pastors left discouraged.
9. The church rarely prayed together. In its last eight years, the only time of corporate prayer was a three-minute period in the Sunday worship service. Prayers were always limited to members, their friends and families, and their physical needs.
10. The church had no clarity as to why it existed. There was no vision, no mission, and no purpose.
11. The members idolized another era. All of the active members were over the age of 67 the last six years of the church. And they all remembered fondly, to the point of idolatry, was the era of the 1970s. They saw their future to be returning to the past.
12. The facilities continued to deteriorate. It wasn't really a financial issue. Instead, the members failed to see the continuous deterioration of the church building. Simple stated, they no longer had "outsider eyes."

Though this story is bleak and discouraging, we must learn from such examples. As many as 100,000 churches in America could be dying. Their time is short, perhaps less than ten years.

What do you think of the autopsy on this church? What can we do to reverse these trends?

[This LeaderLesson is by Dr. Thom Rainer, President of Lifeway Christian Resources, and is used by permission. Special thanks to Dr. Rainer for sharing this challenging post with us. For more helpful posts, please visit his website: www.ThomRainer.com.]

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