Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 11 Things I Learned

This article is by Dr. Thom Rainer, President and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources

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. Arguments were more frequent; business meetings became more acrimonious.

7. **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.

8. **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.

9. **The church had no clarity as to why it existed.** There was no vision, no mission, and no purpose.

10. **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.

11. **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?

I think that the above Article is worth any church’s consideration. It is printed here just as he gave it.

Jim Harris
New Members:
New Church members, Ralph and Angie McMillan, joined on August 11th by Profession of Faith and Baptism.

Pastor Search Committee:
The Committee will meet with a prospective new Pastor for MHBC and his wife on Monday, August 19th.

Nominating:
A special Business Meeting will be held on Sunday, August 25th to elect leadership, officers and teachers for the coming Church year.

Deacons:
1. The Church voted that the terms of service as Deacon for Kirby Adcock and Dennis Sims be extended for one (1) year.
2. The Church voted that Larry Fowler serve as Deacon for a three (3) year term by acclamation.

We are excited to welcome new members, Ralph & Angie McMillan, into our Church Family. Ralph & Angie have a 3-year old daughter, Lily, and are expecting another baby soon. Angie is the daughter of Wayne & Mary George. Please take a moment to greet our newest members and make them feel welcome in their new Church home!

MHBC Monthly Report
as of 08/18/2013

Average Sunday School Attendance............... 44
Average Worship Attendance.......................... 59

Week .... Month

Budget Requirement ............... $ 2,498.27 $ 9,993.08
General Offering:  
07/28/2013 .............................. $ 2,540.00
08/04/2013 .................................. 2,264.00
08/01/2013 .................................. 2,275.00
08/18/2013 .................................. 1,357.00 $ 8,436.00
Ahead/Deficit (+/-) ................................ $ - 1,557.08
YTD Ahead/Deficit (+/-) $ - 10,240.91

Have a safe Labor Day

The Church Office will be closed on Monday September 2nd in observance of Labor Day.

North Carolina Missions Offering

MHBC will collect the NC Missions Offering during September. Your gifts to the NCMO will help minister to people in need, relieve suffering, teach children about missions, start new churches and bring people to faith in Christ.

Fellowship Supper

Bring a covered dish and enjoy a delicious Fellowship Supper with your MHBC Family on Wednesday, September 18th in the Fellowship Hall at 6:15 p.m. Prayer Meeting will follow the meal.
YOU MADE ME PROUD

On Friday Night and Saturday, August 16 &17 we hosted the Intentionally Evangelistic Church Strategy Conference here at Milford Hills Baptist Church. It was the biggest thing like that we had attempted since I have been here.

We had Dr. Don McCutcheon from the Baptist State Convention leading the Conference, and we had 43 people on Friday from 6 to 9 pm, and 45 on Saturday from 9 am to 2 pm. Fourteen of those people were from our church, but we had 6 other churches represented.

We had snack breaks every hour, and on Saturday, we fed a delicious meal to everyone. Our Kitchen committee was on top of everything. They did a wonderful job. Many of you cooked and fixed snacks that were enjoyed by everyone. Our men set up the facilities and then restored everything back to its rightful place. Others helped with all that was needed and done during the conference.

Dr. McCutcheon was thrilled with it all. He expressed to me what a superb job was done by all. I could tell by the way that he talked that the job done here was above and beyond what he was used to being done, and he has had conferences in much bigger churches than ours.

I could name names, but I am not going to do that. I know who you are, but more importantly, God knows who you are, and He will bless you in it and for it. So many of the people expressed to me what a good job you did, and how much they enjoyed not only the Conference, but all that our Church did for them.

God Bless you, and I love you very much.

Jim Harris

FACING A NEW YEAR

EVERY TEACHER, WORKER, COMMITTEE MEMBER

There is no greater blessing than to know that you are a Born Again Child of God. There is no greater service than that which is performed for God who has made us His Child.

As we face this coming Church year, Let us realize that we belong, not to ourselves, but to Lord Jesus who bought us. (1 Corinthians 6:19) What? Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which you have of God, and you are not your own?

Belonging to Jesus, we are to Glorify Him. (1 Corinthians 6:20) For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.

Now, to do that, let us Give God the best. You are at work on time, and you meet other time lines, so why sleep in on Sunday Morning and arrive at God's meeting late? Sunday School starts at 9:45 every Sunday Morning, and EVERY TEACHER SHOULD BE IN THEIR CLASS ROOM AT LEAST BY 9:30. 15 MINUTES EARLY. IT IS ABSOLUTELY A DISGRACE TO GOD'S SALVATION IN YOU FOR YOU TO SHOW THAT HIS WORK DOES NOT HOLD FIRST PLACE IN YOUR LIFE.

Pupils, you should be on time also. You meet other meetings on time or even early. Why are you late to Study God's Word. Teachers, start on time if no one is there but you.

This Church year, just give God your best, and He will bless you and His Church. So often we do not have visitors. We Should, but if we did what would they think about how we do God's Business? Would they see that we Love God and Love the Word of God, and the Work of God?

Bad habits are hard to break and especially when the Devil will encourage you in them. Don't let the Devil use your life for his purpose.

I love you, and want you to be all that you can be for Jesus.

Jim Harris
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