

Autopsy of a Deceased Church – 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive  
Thom S. Rainer (B&H Books, Nashville, TN)

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

- A The purpose of the autopsy is to learn with more clarity why a church died
- B Why go through the pain of an autopsy
  - because we need to know so that others may possibly avoid death
- C The prayerful commitment
  - the trauma of observing an autopsy is only beneficial if it is received as a warning to the living

Question: Why do many church members in dying churches refuse to see the decline in the health of the church?

Chapter 2 – Slow Erosion

- A It is rare for a long-term church member to see erosion in his/her own church. Often the decline is in physical facilities but it is much more than that (decline in vibrant ministries, member's prayer lives, outward focus, connection to the community and in the hopes and dreams of those who remain).
- B It's nothing that is new – OT book of Haggai tells of the decay of the temple in 520 BC

Question: What was your church like 10 or 20 years ago versus today? Do you see any signs of erosion?

Chapter 3 - The Past as a Hero

- A There are several points in the life cycle of a declining church where the church can/could have reversed the decline they are/were experiencing. Most churches that close don't shut their doors over a single or few cataclysmic events.
- B Autopsy – the common thread
  - #1 – deceased/declining church lived for a long time with the past as hero (we will die before we change). They were fighting for the past; the good old days; the way it used to be; the way we want it today. Dissenters warned they would die if they didn't change; the dissenters left and death come closer and closer.
- C Everyone loves a hero – we respect the past; at times we revere the past; but we cannot live in the past.

Question – are there any areas in your church where you are resisting change simply because of your own preferences?

## Chapter 4 – The Church Refused to Look Like the Community

- A In the 'good old days,' the church was part of the community and looked like the community. Then, usually slowly, the community began to change. The church's response to this was often subtle. For quite a while the church held its own as members moved a short distance but many keep attending. But eventually members (and their now grown children) did not see the point in driving to a transitioned community that had no identity to the church. So the church began its death march.

There was no willingness to change to attract the people now in the community or to be open for them to be in leadership in the church. Why would they ever consider letting outsiders take over the church?

- B The Church Becomes a Fortress – most members of dying churches will deny that their church is a fortress. But people in the community did not feel welcome in the church.

- C Others first = life; Me first = death

When a church ceases to have a heart and ministry for its community, it is on the path toward death. In the New Testament, churches are exhorted to be others-centered. Vibrant and living churches look after the interest of others (Phil. 2:4). But dying churches are concerned with self-preservation. They become self-centered and self-gratifying.

Question: Does your church try to reach out and minister to its community, even to the point of giving up authority to better reach people?

## Chapter 5 – The Budget Moved Inwardly

- A Follow the money. For where the money of the church goes, so goes its heart. You can see in the budgets of deceased churches over several years that predictable patterns begin to emerge. Most members have no idea that a financial death march is slowly taking place.

- B Churches (Greedy) Too – Maybe too strong to say dying churches are greedy – perhaps it is better to say that their funds are focused inwardly. Personnel costs as a percentage of the budget rise because members view staff as their personal caretakers. Staff and facility spending are the last to be cut.

- C Where are the Cuts Made? The first to go are ministry and programs with an outward focus.

- D The Rich Young Ruler and Deceased Churches – the man was grieved at the thought of giving up his possessions. Dying churches spend for their way of doing church.; their comfort; their possessions. Some do not die broke. It's not a matter of how much you have. It's what you do with your money or what your attitude is about the money. Some accumulate out of fear of running out of money.

- E The Autopsy was Clear and Revealing – The common pattern is that funds were used to keep the machinery of the church moving and the members happy rather than funding the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. The money, though, was symptomatic of a heart problem. The church cared more for its own needs than for the needs of the community and the world. And no church can sustain such an inward focus indefinitely. I will eventually die of heart failure.

Question: What are some ways churches can move their use of funds from predominantly an inward focus to an outward focus?

## Chapter 6 - The Great Commission Becomes the Great Omission

- A Nostalgia can be good, but we can't live in the past or re-create the past.
- B Great Commission amnesia – Jesus teaches us to go and make disciples...to baptize. We are to reach out. These are action words. Dying churches forgot (or decided) not to act on Christ's command. The command was to go and to depend totally on the power of Christ. But the deceased church stopped going and stopped depending on Christ.
- C The Convenient Omission of Action Words – As members of dying churches recall the good old days, they longed for similar results today. They wanted the same results as yesteryear but were not willing to expend the efforts. They just wanted it to happen without prayer, without sacrifice, without hard work. The heart of the issue, though, is that members of the dying churches did not want growth unless that growth met their preferences and allowed them to remain comfortable.

Question: What is the relationship between Jesus' promise to always be with us in Matthew 28:20 and a mind-set that focuses on one's own comfort?

## Chapter 7 – The Preference Driven Church

- A Me, Myself and I – a church cannot survive long-term where members are focused on their own preferences in music style, length and order of worship, color and design of buildings/rooms, activities and programs, need of ministry and staff, my, my, my... We are to be servants... obedient, put others first. We are to do whatever it takes to seek the best for others and our church. Without a self-sacrificial attitude, death is inevitable.
- B A church by definition is a body of believers who function for the greater good of the congregation. The dying churches really died before they closed the doors because the members refused to be the church.

Question: What are some common areas where church members insist or demand their own preferences?

## Chapter 8 – Pastoral Tenure Decreases

- A For the majority of the 14 decreased congregations studied, pastors came and went at a pace of every two or three years. The church would call a new pastor with the hope that the pastor could lead the church back to health. The pastor makes a few changes – the members don't like them and resist. The pastor gets discouraged and leaves (or is asked to leave). Repeat the cycle.
- B A Story Waiting to Happen – All signs point to a death spiral with a steady rotation of pastors and the decreasing pay of each new pastor.
- C Life Stages of Pastoral Tenure
  - Honeymoon (year 1) For a season, pastor and members can do no wrong in each other's eyes.
  - Conflicts and Challenges (years 2 and 3) – Conflicts arise as both parties discover imperfections
  - Crossroads part 1 (years 4 and 5) If conflicts are severe, pastor will leave or be forced out by now. If the conflicts are well managed, these can be productive years
  - Fruit and Harvest (years 6 through 10) If pastors make it to this point, these are the most productive years – both parties have worked through tough times and trust and love has deepened.
  - Crossroads part 2 (11+ years) – one or two paths – leader is invigorated and tackling new challenges or tends to become resistant to change and complacent.

Most pastors in dying churches leave in stage 2 (years 2 or 3)

- D The Exceptions – 4 of the 14 churches had long term pastorates. The pastors had adopted the attitude of the recalcitrant members. There was no attempt to have an outward focus. For these pastors, decline and death of the church was preferable to conflicts. They became caretakers only.

Question: Look at the life stages of pastoral tenure and identify which of the two stages are more common in a dying church. Why is pastoral tenure even important in any church?

#### Chapter 9 – The Church Rarely Prays Together

- A Prayer becomes perfunctory in a dying church.
- B When a church is engaged in meaningful prayer, it becomes both the cause and the result of great church health.

Question: Why would a church's failure to engage in meaningful prayer lead to its demise?

#### Chapter 10 – The Church Had No Clear Purpose

- A The Churches Did Not Get It – Common comments by members of dying/deceased churches:
1. We were going through the motions
  2. Everything we did seemed to be like we were in a rut or a bad routine
  3. We became more attached to our ways of doing church than we did asking the Lord what he wanted us to do.
  4. We stopped asking what we should do for fear that it would require too much effort or change.
- B When the Church Has a Biblical Purpose – Philippians 1:5 – healthy churches have a partnership in the gospel. But dying churches at some point have forgotten their history, almost always the result of a slow, deadly process. Attitudes shift from gospel-centered and other-centered to self-centered. An outward focus becomes an inward obsession. Routines and traditions and rituals replaced the original purpose of being a gospel-driven people. A church without a gospel-centered purpose is no longer a church at all.

Question: How can routine and tradition get in the way of a church fulfilling her purpose?

#### Chapter 11 – The Church Obsessed Over the Facilities

- A Being good stewards of those material things that God has given our churches is good. Becoming obsessed with any one item to the neglect of His mission is idolatry.
- B Jesus was very clear on any obsession with material things. We are to be good stewards of personal finances and possessions and also of the material items in our churches. But if we focus on 'things,' no matter how meaningful they are, so that we get distracted from the eternal, we have lost our focus. And a church that has lost her eternal focus is one step closer to dying and death.

Question: Why do so many churches have conflicts over 'things'?

## Part 2

### Chapter 12 – My Church Has Symptoms of sickness – 4 Responses

A There are no magical, easy-fix solutions. The 12 responses in Chapters 12-14 are not a recipe to create or repair to get the perfect church... they are more of a cry to God to intervene, and to create a willingness on the part of church members to be obedient. It's serious stuff... it's sobering.

B The Path – generally, American churches can be categorized as follows:  
10% Healthy  
40% Symptoms of Sickness  
40% Very Sick  
10% Dying

This chapter addresses the 40% with Symptoms of Sickness.

C What are the Symptoms of Sickness? One of the signs is a pervasive attitude that the best days of the church are behind them. The ministries and programs of these churches tend to be shifting more and more for members of the congregation rather than those on the outside... moving to a more inward focus. There are few new people and no sense of true disciple-making is taking place. The church tends to have a lot of program and ministry clutter with a great deal of activity and busyness but a great deal of it has no meaningful purpose. The primary reason those programs and ministries continue is simply because 'that's the way we have always done it.'

D Four Responses

1. Pray that God will open the eyes of leadership and members for opportunities to reach into the community where the church is located – to have an impact in their local community
2. Take an honest audit of how church members spend their time being involved. In most of these churches, members are involved in ministries for themselves, often to the exclusion of ministries beyond the church. The church loses momentum when the members start forming holy huddles.
3. Take an audit of how the church spends its money. Balance between inward and outward spending is the key and most of these churches are out of balance toward inward spending.
4. Make specific plans to minister and to evangelize your community. Pray about it and honestly evaluate your time in programs and ministry and how the church spends its funds.

Question: Summarize the 4 responses for churches that are showing signs of sickness. What other responses could be added to those four?

## Chapter 13 – My Church Is Very Sick – 4 Responses

- A Rarely does a church move from the category of 'symptoms of being sick' to 'very sick' overnight. It's more of a continuum. That's why it is so hard to detect and to respond if you are close to the church. And if a church waits until it is very sick it is extremely difficult to get better.
- B Typical Indicators – very sick churches typically have at least three of the following:
1. Declining worship attendance
  2. Prolonged times of apathy with occasional times of intense conflict
  3. The church is not (really) known in the community (you would be surprised how many don't know the church exists).
  4. New members are rare
  5. Revolving door of pastors – frustration and conflict
  6. The good old days are many years in the past
- C Four Responses
1. The church must admit and confess its dire need, to acknowledge their condition
  2. The church must pray for strength and wisdom to do whatever is necessary (not easy)
  3. The church must be willing to change radically (and quickly)
  4. The change must lead to action and to an outward focus.

Question: Where does a very sick church begin if its members and leaders truly desire reversal? What sacrifices must be made? What comforts must be given up?

## Chapter 14 – My Church Is Dying – 4 Responses

- A No one wants his or her church to die. But churches die. The universal church will never die but individual congregations die.
- B Four Responses – Death with Dignity
1. Sell the property and give the funds to another church, perhaps a new church that has begun or will soon begin
  2. Give the building to another church
  3. Turn over the leadership and the property to those who reside in the neighborhood
  4. Merge with another church but let the other church have ownership and leadership of the church

Question: What have you learned from this book? What has God taught you?