

Autopsy of a Deceased Church

12 WAYS TO KEEP YOURS ALIVE

Thom S. Rainer

Autopsy
of a
Deceased
Church

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12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive



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To
My Grandchildren

Canon Rainer
Maggie Rainer
Nathaniel Rainer
Will Rainer
Harper Rainer
Bren Rainer
Joshua Rainer

With many more surely to follow

And always to
Nellie Jo
“Jo Jo” to our grandchildren

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Acknowledgments

I never expected to write a book about death, whether the subject would be the death of humans or the death of churches. I am hopeful and optimistic by nature. Death and dying, frankly, are subjects I would rather avoid.

But then I wrote a post called “Autopsy of a Deceased Church” on my blog at www.ThomRainer.com. I was amazed at the response. It became and still is my most viewed post. Even months later, people still read that article daily. I knew I had struck a chord.

I first express appreciation to the community of readers at my blog. I know some of you by name, but with millions of viewers a year, I can’t know all of you. Thank you, every one of you, for taking time to read what I write. I am still amazed that anyone wants to read my works.

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If you know me at all, you know I love my family. I love my wife, Nellie Jo. I love my sons, Sam, Art, and Jess. I love my daughters-in-law, Erin, Sarah, and Rachel. And I love my seven grandchildren whose names are at the forefront on the dedication page. I fully expect more grandchildren will be on the way by the time this book is published. No pressure.

Though I stand amazed that any of you readers would actually read my publications, I thank you for it. And though I don’t know what expectations, hopes, or burdens you bring to the reading of this book, I pray God will use it greatly for you and your congregations.

Ultimately, my greatest gratitude goes to my Lord. This book is about His church. He cares about His church. He loves His church. I pray that my simple words will be used in some small way to help His churches in His power and strength. And if this tome is used in such a way, I know where the credit will go and to Whom the glory belongs.

PART 1

The Autopsy

CHAPTER 1

Introduction



I knew the patient before she died.

It was ten years ago. She was very sick at the time, but she did not want to admit it.

There was only a glimmer of hope at best. But that hope could become a reality only with radical change. She wasn't nearly ready for that change. Indeed, she was highly resistant to any change. Even though she was very sick.

Even though she was dying.

I told her the bad news bluntly: You are dying. I hope I said those words with some compassion. I did feel badly sharing the news. But it was the only way I could see to get her attention.

I even told her that, at best, she had five years to live. At the time I said those words, I don't really think I was that optimistic. I would not have been surprised if she died within the year.

But she was not only in denial; she was in angry denial.

“I’ll show you,” she said. “I’ll prove you are wrong. I am not dying.”

Her words were fierce. Defiant. Angry.

It was time for me to leave. I had done all I could.

I left.

I was not angry. I was sad. Very sad.

Now to her credit, she was right up to a point. She did not die in five years. She proved resilient and survived another ten years. But her last decade, though she was technically alive, was filled with pain, sickness, and despair.

I’m not so sure her longer-term survival was a good thing.

She never got better. She slowly and painfully deteriorated.

And then she died.

The Autopsy

She, of course, is a church. A real church. A church in the Midwest.

A church that was probably born out of vision.

A church that died because she no longer had a vision.

I was the church’s consultant over a decade ago. The church had reached its peak attendance many years earlier. The worship attendance of 750 in 1975 took place during “the good old days.” We’ll talk about those days shortly.

By the time I arrived, the attendance had fallen to an average of eighty-three. The large sanctuary seemed to swallow the 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 they refused to hear. 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?" That was the moment I gave my foreboding declaration of five years at most.

Of course, I was wrong on the exact number of years. The church has only recently closed. Like many dying churches, it held on to life tenaciously. The church lasted ten years after my declaration of a terminal diagnosis.

My friend from that church called me a week after the church officially closed its doors. We talked for over an hour. I took no pleasure in discovering that my diagnosis was correct. Together, my friend and I reviewed the past ten or more years. We were able to piece together a fairly accurate autopsy.

We learned with even more clarity why the church died. We performed an autopsy.

It was not fun, but we thought it was necessary.

Why Go Through the Pain?

My sister died before I was born. I only recently learned that my father convinced the attending doctor to perform an autopsy, and that he convinced the doctor to let him be in the room while the autopsy was performed. My grieving father had to know why his beloved Amy died. He had to know why her little heart had failed.

He had to know. He just had to know.

Why should I take you through the pain of discovering why churches die?

Because we need to know.

Autopsies are performed on humans to find out why they died. The discoveries might give surviving family members information they need to avoid the same path as their loved one.

Sometimes a forensic pathologist performs an autopsy to discover how a murder was committed, or how an accident happened. The information is always useful. It sometimes brings people to justice.

But that does not mean autopsies are pleasant.

I plan to take you through the results of fourteen church autopsies. I won't bore you with a church-by-church report because there is much redundancy. I will instead summarize my findings of all the deceased churches.

I owe much gratitude to those who talked with me freely and openly, those who performed the autopsies with me. Each of them was a member of a church that was once alive, but now is dead. Each of them went through the pain of an autopsy with me.

The churches are diverse in their denominational or non-denominational backgrounds. They are diverse in their locations. They are diverse in their local and regional demographics.

But they are all similar in one significant way: they followed paths that caused them to die.

Jesus told Peter that the Church will never die: “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the forces of Hades will not overpower it” (Matt. 16:18). Indeed the Church will never die. But churches have and are dying.

It is my prayer that these autopsies, though painful to watch, will prove helpful to leaders and laity of churches today. As many as 100,000¹ churches in America are showing signs of decline toward death.

May God give us the courage to make the changes necessary to give new life to our churches.

The Prayerful Commitment

In every chapter, you will be asked a simple question: “Will you make a prayerful commitment?”

The commitment is really between you and God. Perhaps God will raise up an army of church members who are no longer satisfied with business as usual.

The trauma of observing an autopsy is only beneficial if it is received as a warning to the living. This book is not about dwelling on the past, but bearing fruit in the future. The prayer commitment in each chapter is a positive challenge to take the hill, so to speak, where others may have failed. The commitments are vital in this book. Because if we heed the warnings of the autopsy, we stand to benefit far greater than we could otherwise imagine.

Prayerful Commitment I

God, open my eyes that I might see my church as You see it. Let me see where change needs to take place, even if it is painful to me. And use me, I pray, to be an instrument of that change whatever the cost.

Questions for Further Thought

1. If your church was given a “physical exam” today, what do you think the doctor’s diagnosis would be: healthy, slightly sick, very sick, or dying? Why?
2. Why do many church members in dying churches refuse to see the decline in the health of the church?
3. Explain how churches can die in the context of Matthew 16:18, which says Hades will not prevail.

Note

1. This number is based on the foundational research for my book *Breakout Churches*.