

Lanterns above the
Stone of Unction in
the Church of the
Holy Sepulchre



A CRISIS OF FAITH & A CALL TO ACTION

EVENING PROGRAM—A MODERN-DAY WARNING TO TAKE HOME

1

A CRISIS OF FAITH & A CALL TO ACTION

- Introduction to *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*
- A Sign of a Dying Church
- A Crisis of Faith
- A Call to Action
- *Anatomy of a Revived Church: An Introduction*
- Some Final Comments



Looking down towards Jerusalem
from the Mount of Olives

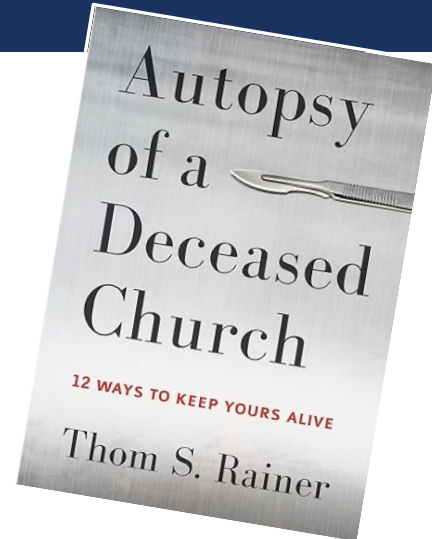
2

2

AUTOPSY OF A DECEASED CHURCH

- “Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 ways to keep yours alive”
 - Written by Mr. Thom S. Rainer, a church consultant, published in 2014
 - Rainer is the founder and CEO of Church Answers
 - Prior to Church Answers, he served as president & CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources

If you haven't read it, you should



3

3

A Warning: A Key Question to Ask

The Path to Ecclesial Survival: Distinguishing Truth from Tradition

The road of history is filled with thousands of deceased religious organizations that lost their way. While core “Truth” survives, individual communities often die out not because of doctrinal changes, but because they fail to adapt their traditions and service methods to meet current needs.



4

A WARNING: A KEY QUESTION TO ASK (1/3)

- The road of history is cluttered with thousands of deceased churches & religious organizations, and perhaps millions who have heard the Truth, but have rejected it
 - Many of which probably had good intentions but lost their way over the years
 - The Truth of course has and will always survive, but the churches of Asia Minor didn't
 - The good news is that the lessons and instruction communicated to them have
 - Unfortunately, those that forget history, tend to repeat it, and as the scriptures state in Ecclesiastes 1:9,

Numerous ecclesias have aged-out and closed their doors.

5

5

A WARNING: A KEY QUESTION TO ASK (2/3)

- Our community is no different than those churches of Truth that existed in the past who have had the Truth, but either died or evolved to the point where they lost it
- We are doomed to repeat this same fate if we don't continue to hold onto the Truth, as well as make sure that we are still servants to the community—internally as well as externally
- What was most interesting to me, when I read Mr. Rainer's book, was that none of the churches that he researched died because of a change in doctrine
 - My guess is this happens over many years, perhaps hundreds of years, but it isn't typically the cause of death

It is our responsibility to keep our lamp burning.

6

6

A WARNING: A KEY QUESTION TO ASK (3/3)

- What killed the churches was **their inability to change** the way they “did church”
 - What I mean, is that they failed to adjust the way they supported their members & the community
 - Often sticking “too tightly” to the way that they always done things
 - They got confused over what is Truth & what is Tradition
- **We should ask ourselves, are we a community on its last leg?**
 - We need to make sure that we have the appropriate tools as individuals & as ecclesias to make changes before it is too late

We need to stick to principles, but practices can change.

7

7

SOME SOBERING STATISTICS

- Mr. Rainer first pronounces that all the dead churches he studied, were “...similar in one significant way: they followed paths that caused them to die”
 - There wasn’t a single cause, but rather **a set of actions or inactions** that led to their death
 - He states that, today “As many as 100,000 churches in America are showing decline towards death”



There are empty churches all around us

8

8

MAIN FINDINGS (1/2)

■ *Slow Erosion*

- “Growth may come rapidly, but decline is usually slow, imperceptibly slow. This erosion is the worse type of decline for churches, because the members have no sense of urgency of change.”
- When we are in the middle of it, we might not even notice
 - The signs might be all around, but if we don’t take the time to look, we will miss them as so many others have

We must keep our eyes open.

The erosion doesn’t have to be quick, it can be over decades



9

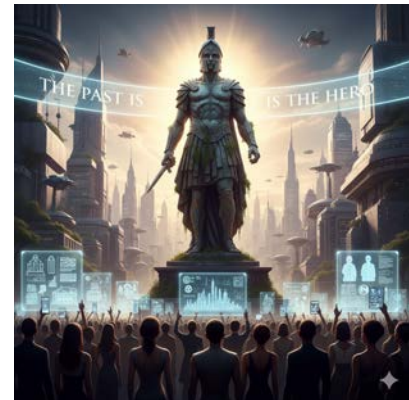
9

MAIN FINDINGS (2/2)

■ *The Past is the Hero*

- Most churches that died, lived for a long time with The Past as The Hero
 - For these churches their decline was **not** about holding onto Biblical Truths or clinging onto clear Christian morals
 - They were not fighting about primary, secondary, or even tertiary doctrine
 - None of them were fighting about doctrine
 - They were all in fact, fighting for the past—the good old days

Isa 43:18 Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old.



10

10

WHAT THEY CLANG TO...

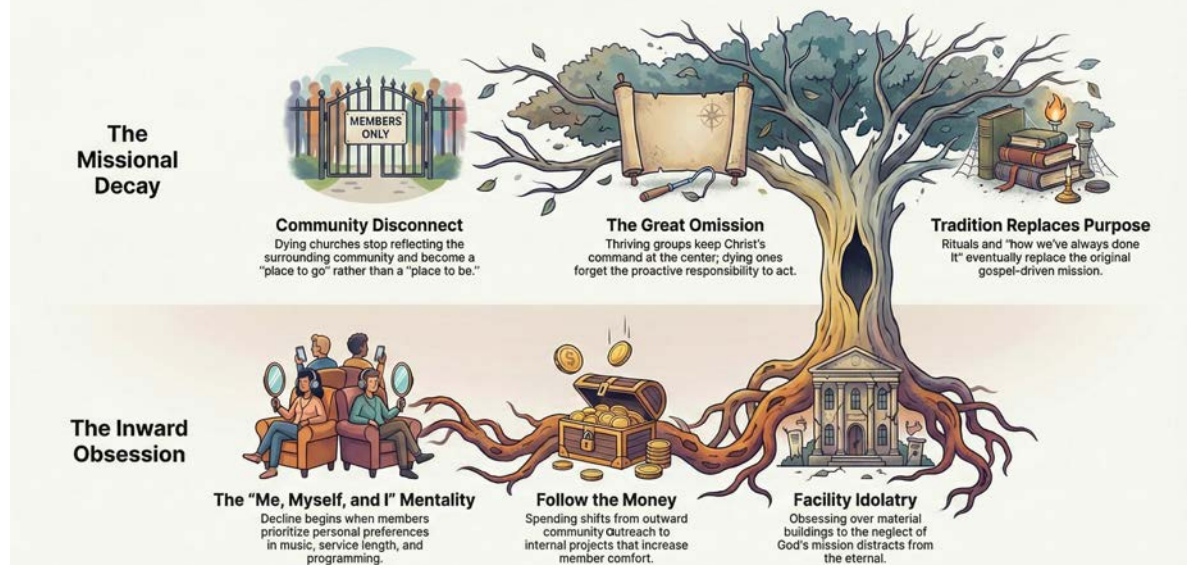
- Worship styles, order of service, time of services, and buildings, among other things
 - The main issue was that the congregation, for the most part, worried more about themselves, then others
 - “They looked inwardly, instead of outwardly”
- Haggai records a similar time in the history of God’s chosen, when a remnant returned to build the temple, but instead they forgot the task at hand & moved unto rebuilding their own houses
 - Haggai 1:2-4,

Where is our focus? It must be God first.

11

A Sign of a Dying Church

Warning Signs of a Dying Church: A Self-Examination Guide



12

A SIGN OF A DYING CHURCH (1/11)

The Church Refused to Look Like the Community

- They should be part of & reflect the community around them
- Unfortunately, dying churches didn't
 - Slowly, many of them, stopped being part of the community
 - It was just a place to go for the members & not a place to be
 - The dead churches may have invited the community in once and a while, but they didn't make much of an effort anymore
 - For most of them, their members were **more concerned with "...protecting the way they did church, than reaching residence of the community"**

Do our ecclesias reflect the surrounding community?

13

13

A SIGN OF A DYING CHURCH (2/11)

- A dying **"...church ceases to have a heart and ministry for its community; it is on the path towards death"**
- We need to remember that whenever churches are mentioned in the New Testament, they were always exhorted to be other-centered
 - The Apostle Paul stresses the need to be other-centered in Philippians 2:1-4
- **"Vibrant and living churches look after the interest of others. But dying churches are concerned with self-preservation"**
 - This is a simple Biblical truth

14

14

A SIGN OF A DYING CHURCH (3/11)

The Budget Moved Inwardly

- “When you conduct an autopsy of a church, you must follow the money. For where the money of the church goes, so does its heart.”
- Findings didn’t identify greed to be an issue for any of the dead churches, but rather a shift of priority
 - Namely, their spending moved from things that were outward reaching to those things that made the members more comfortable
- **Money “...was symptomatic of a heart problem”**
 - In these cases, the “...church cared more for its own needs than the community and the world”

***Where does your ecclesia spend most of its resources?
On internal wants or external ones?***

15

15

A SIGN OF A DYING CHURCH (4/11)

The Commission Becomes the Great Omission

- “Thriving churches have **the Great Commission as the centerpiece** of their vision, while dying churches have forgotten the clear command of Christ”
- Christ clearly commands us to do so; Matthew records one such time when Jesus instructs us in such manner in Matthew 28:19-20,
- Ecclesial membership, which is membership in the body of Christ, **isn’t a stationary task, but rather a proactive responsibility**
 - This responsibility requires us **to go beyond ourselves—put others first...put God first**
 - It requires many of us, at times, **to be uncomfortable—stretch your time & money**
 - It requires us **to act—life is the time to serve the LORD**

What about your ecclesia? Is it proactive or active?

16

16

A SIGN OF A DYING CHURCH (5/11)

The Preference-Driven Church

- **We can't be me, myself, and I focused**
 - “A church cannot survive long-term where members are focused on their own preferences: my music style; my desired length and order of service; my desired color and design and layout of rooms; my activities and programs; ...my, my, my”
 - There is no ambiguity in the **self-sacrificing** example that Christ provides
 - We are reminded of this in Philippians 2:5-8,

Do we focus on the trinity of me, myself, and I?

17

17

A SIGN OF A DYING CHURCH (6/11)

- “Membership in the church is not country club membership. It's not about paying your dues and getting perks”
- We need to remember that we are members of a working body, each of us having a particular part to play—a specific responsibility to take on
 - Let us remember the words found in I Corinthians 12:12-14 & 26-28,
- “We are members of the body of Christ. We do not exist to serve ourselves, we exist for the greater good of the body. **Members of dying churches do not get this**”

The ecclesia needs to be a living & working entity.

18

18

A SIGN OF A DYING CHURCH (7/11)

Pastoral Tenure Decreases

- Another interesting fact, dying churches went through pastors every few years
- Usually because the pastor got frustrated because of the congregation's unwillingness to change or because the members fired the pastor because the pastor wanted change
 - In many ways, we are fortunate that we don't have pastors where we can place blame—use as a scape goat
 - But, does your ecclesia have a life-long recording brother?
 - The same set of serving brethren, year after year?
- **Let us not forget** that just because we might not hold an elected position, we are still all responsible to the rest of the body—we all need to provide the on-going spiritual support required by our members

***Is your ecclesia losing members to other ecclesias
in the area or to the outside?***

19

19

A SIGN OF A DYING CHURCH (8/11)

The Church Rarely Prayed Together

- The dead churches he investigated had stopped praying together
 - "...**prayer and the health** of the church go hand-in-hand. When the church is engaged in meaningful prayer, it becomes both the cause and the result of greater church health."
 - This should be of no surprise given the words found in Acts 2:41-42 & 46-47,
- The writer of Acts notes that they were fervent, intense, and passionate about prayer
 - Prayer appears to have been the lifeblood of the early ecclesia... "No prayer. No hope. And the church starts to die."

Has your ecclesia held a prayer session recently?

20

20

A SIGN OF A DYING CHURCH (9/11)

The Church Had No Clear Purpose

- Dying or dead churches lost sight of their purpose
 - "...they were engaged in an activity called, '**This is the way we've always done it.**'"
 - This is opposite of how the Apostle Paul refers to the ecclesia in Philippi as recorded in Philippians 1:3-5,
- "The members at Philippi knew what they were supposed to do. They were to live the gospel. They were to proclaim the gospel."
 - As Paul states, "...from the first day until now."
- "Attitudes shifted **from gospel-centered and other-centered, to self-centered.** An outward focus became an inward obsession."

21

21

A SIGN OF A DYING CHURCH (10/11)

- **Routines, traditions, and rituals replaced** the original purpose of being a gospel-driven people
- "As the church **lost her purpose**, she slowly but surely began to die."
- "A church **without a gospel-centered purpose** is no longer a church at all."

Does anyone know how we got our tradition of covering the emblems?

22

22

A SIGN OF A DYING CHURCH (I I / I I)

The Obsessed Over the Facilities

- For many of the dead churches, they obsessed over their facilities
- Of course, being a good steward of the material things God has blessed us with is right, but becoming obsessed with them to the neglect of His mission is idolatry
- We should have no doubt that we should be good stewards in this sense, "...but if we focus on 'things,' no matter how meaningful they are, so that we become distracted from the eternal, we have lost our focus."
- "...a church that has lost her eternal focus is one step closer to dying and death."



Which is more important?

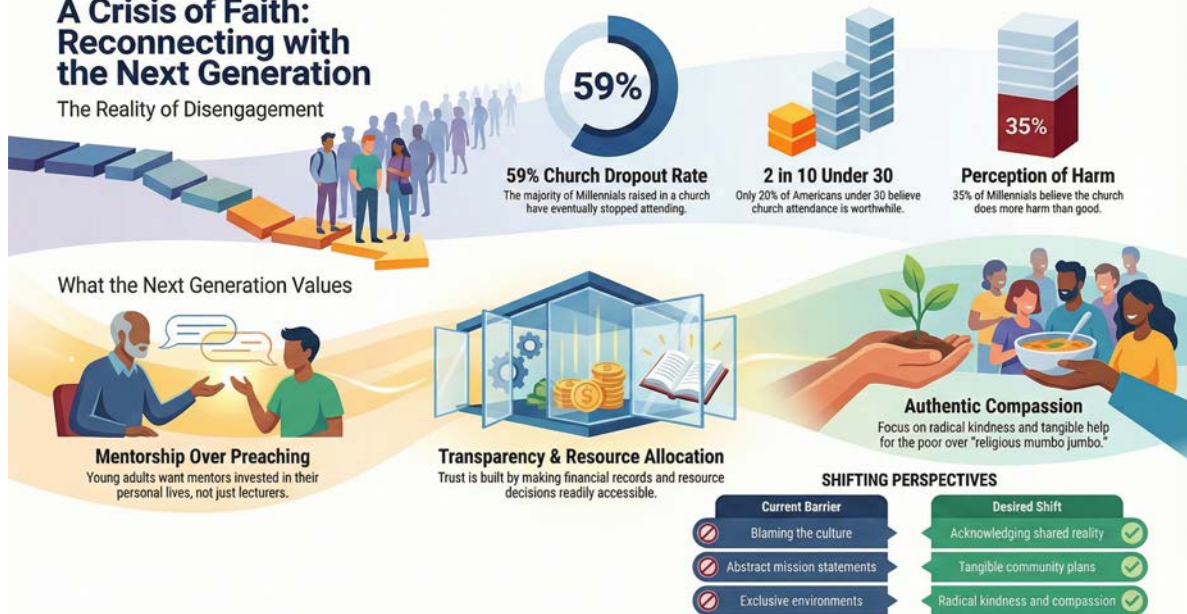
23

23

A Crisis of Faith: Are We Losing our Young People?

A Crisis of Faith: Reconnecting with the Next Generation

The Reality of Disengagement



24

A CRISIS OF FAITH: ARE WE LOSING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE?

- According to a research study posted on faithit.com and other sites, “59 Percent of Millennials Raised in a Church Have Dropped Out—And They’re Trying to Tell Us Why”
- Many studies indicate that church attendance and Impressions of church in the US are the lowest in recent history, and most drastic among millennials described as 22- to 35-year-olds
 - i.e., those born between 1980 & 1994
 - We are now in Gen Z, which appears to act in a very similar manner



25

25

ARE WE LOSING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE? (1/4)

- We need to understand how to **attract & hold** young adults and others to the ecclesia
- According to one study, only 2 in 10 Americans under 30 believe attending a church is important or worthwhile, which is an all-time low
- We need to examine ourselves and our ecclesia, and then to take the appropriate action to make sure these numbers don’t represent our congregation
- So, why do 35% of millennials have an anti-church stance, believing the church does more harm than good?

Has your ecclesia discussed this?

26

26

ARE WE LOSING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE? (2/4)

- **Nobody's Listening to Us**—Millennials value voice & receptivity above all else
- **We're Sick of Hearing About Values & Mission Statements**—Faithit states, "Stop wasting time on the religious mumbo jumbo and get back to the heart of the gospel."
- **Helping the Poor Isn't a Priority**—Faithit asks the question, what is the number of hours the average member spends in "church" activities
- **We're Tired of You Blaming the Culture**—The millennials state, "We're aware of the downfalls of the culture—believe it or not, we are actually living in it too."

²⁷ <https://faithit.com/12-reasons-millennials-over-church-sam-eaton/>

27

ARE WE LOSING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE? (3/4)

- **The "You Can't Sit With Us" Affect**—As Faithit states, "...until the church finds a way to be radically kinder and more compassionate than the world at large, we tell outsiders they're better off on their own."
- **Distrust & Misallocation of Resources**—Go out of your way to make all financial records readily accessible
- **We Want to Be Mentored, Not Preached At**—Young adults are looking for mentors who are invested in their lives and their future
- **We Want to Feel Valued**—Millennials are told from the second they wake up, as Faithit states, to the second they take a sleeping pill that they aren't good enough

²⁸ <https://faithit.com/12-reasons-millennials-over-church-sam-eaton/>

28

ARE WE LOSING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE? (4/4)

- **We Want You to Talk to Us About Controversial Issues** (Because No One Is)—This illustrates how important it is that we create a place where someone older is showing them a better way with regards to all the difficult and challenging issues
- **The Public Perception**—Faithit argues that “...it’s time to focus on changing the public perception of the church within the community.”
- **Stop Talking About Us** (Unless You’re Actually Going to Do Something)—Faithit comments that we need to stop speaking in abstract sound bites and make a tangible plan for how to reach millennials
- **You’re Failing to Adapt**—Here’s the bottom line, according to Faithit—we are probably not really reaching millennials

²⁹ <https://faithit.com/12-reasons-millennials-over-church-sam-eaton/>

29

A Call to Action

A Call to Action: Revitalizing Our Ecclesia

Identifying the Spiritual Crisis

A Crisis of Faith
Current trends suggest the community is losing momentum and moving in the wrong direction.

Strength Starts with the Individual
A strong community is built solely upon spiritually-focused individuals caring for others.

The Risk of Inaction
Failing to adapt and care for members will eventually lead to communal decline.

The Path to Revitalization

The Four R's of Faith
R- R- R- R-
Re-energizing Re-focusing Re-examining Re-breaking
Commit to re-energizing, re-focusing, re-examining, and re-freshing your personal faith.

Purposeful Self-Examination
Individuals and the ecclesia must examine themselves and make necessary changes.

Compassionate Outreach
Reach out to those needing guidance or friendship, both inside and outside the community.

30

A CALL TO ACTION (1/2)

- A strong ecclesia is comprised of strong individuals, and strong spiritually-focused individuals make a strong ecclesia—not about me, but about others
- We have been blessed with many “Lamp Stands,” and we have been given the responsibility to keep the oil burning brightly
 - This requires us to examine ourselves, individually and as an ecclesia, and then to make the necessary changes to ensure that we are constantly caring and feeding our members, as well as attracting those around us
 - Without doing so, we will, sooner or later, die as an ecclesia
 - We all come here because we want to **re-energize, re-focus, re-examine & re-fresh** our faith

Do we have the correct and balanced focus?

31

31

A CALL TO ACTION (2/2)

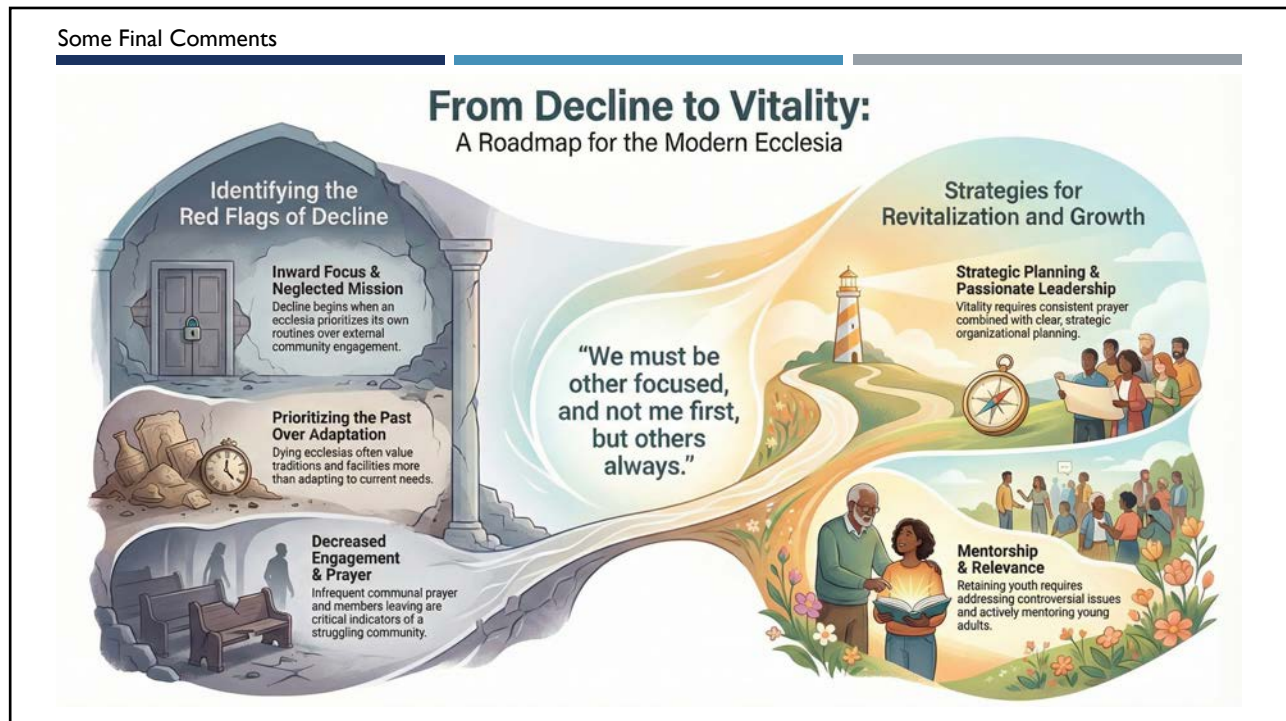
- I believe we have a crisis of faith
 - I don't think we are a dying community, but there are certainly signs that we are going in the wrong direction and in fact might, at least, have a cold
- Now is the time to act
 - We need to challenge ourselves, and exhort and support one another to act
 - We all must do our part to strengthen ourselves and one another
 - Leverage the resources we have in the community (e.g., WCF, Tidings & many others)
 - Reach out to those in need, to those that need guidance, to those that need a friend, to all those that need the Truth to save them—in and outside the ecclesia

What's your ecclesia's plan?

32

32

Some Final Comments



33

QUESTIONS TO BE CONSIDERED

1. How would you evaluate your ecclesia right now? Healthy, not so healthy, very sick, dying? Why did you make this choice?
2. Why do you think that approximately three out of four churches in America are declining today, and that about one in five are dying?
3. Do you know of an ecclesia or church that has chosen to close its doors? Why do you think churches chose to die (more on this tomorrow)?
4. As we look at "change or die" realities, can you name some areas we shouldn't consider changing?
5. What are some of the similarities between a person refusing to change health and lifestyle habits, and an ecclesia/church refusing to change methods and programs?

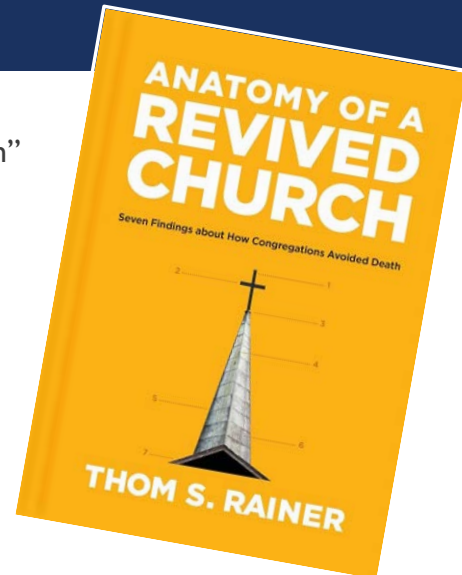
34

34

ANATOMY OF A REVIVED CHURCH

- Fortunately, “Anatomy of a Revived Church: Seven Findings about How Congregations Avoided Death” provides useful insight
 - It is a practical roadmap designed to equip leaders with the knowledge & motivation to choose life & health for their congregations
 - Written by Mr. Thom S. Rainer, a church consultant, published in 2022

If you haven't read it, you should



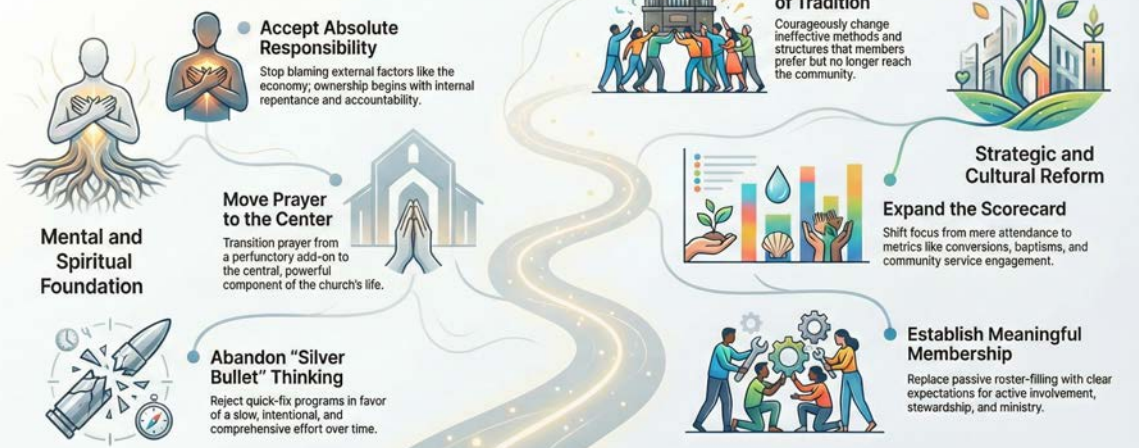
35

35

How to Revive a Dying Church: An Introduction

The Path to Revitalization: Core Pillars of Church Renewal

Based on Thom Rainer's analysis, revitalized churches succeed by making the deliberate choice to prioritize God's mission over personal comfort and long-standing traditions.



36

HOW TO REVIVE A DYING CHURCH (1/5)

- A hopeful counterpoint & follow-up to Rainer's previous work, "Autopsy of a Deceased Church"
- In this book, Rainer analyzes hundreds of congregations that were on a clear path toward closure but managed to reverse their decline and enter a period of genuine revitalization & growth
- Main Thesis: Change or Die
 - Unfortunately, churches often choose to die by refusing to make the necessary, substantive changes, even when the path to life is clear
 - Rainer argues that the churches that revived made the deliberate, often painful, choice to prioritize the mission of God over their comfort & preferences

37

What is our ecclesia's mission?

37

HOW TO REVIVE A DYING CHURCH (2/5)

- **Accepting Responsibility** (The Opposite of Blame)
 - The revitalized churches stopped blaming external factors (like changing neighborhoods, the economy, or the mega-church across town) for their struggles
 - Instead, they took full ownership and accountability for their current condition, recognizing that revitalization begins with internal repentance & a commitment to change
- **Overcoming the Traps of Traditions**
 - These churches recognized that tradition, when treated as an idol, can become toxic
 - They found the courage to evaluate & change methods, programs, and structures (like worship style, committee functions, or building usage) that were no longer effective for reaching their community, even if those traditions were long-standing preferences of members

38

38

HOW TO REVIVE A DYING CHURCH (3/5)

■ Expanding the Scorecard

- Healthy churches refuse to only measure attendance & giving
 - They began tracking meaningful metrics that reflect biblical activity, such as conversions, baptisms, engagement in discipleship pathways, and outward focus/community service projects
 - This shift refocuses the church on its ultimate mission—making disciples

■ Committing to Powerful Prayer

- Rainer found that genuine revival is never divorced from intentional, consistent & fervent prayer
- Revived churches saw prayer move from being a perfunctory add-on to a central, powerful component of the church's spiritual life, acknowledging that God alone brings revival

*Ask, and it will be given to you;
seek, and you will find; knock,
and it will be opened to you.
Matthew 7:7*



39

39

HOW TO REVIVE A DYING CHURCH (4/5)

■ Dealing with Toxins

- Revived churches had leaders who finally found the courage to confront toxic, disruptive, or persistently negative members who undermined leadership and unity
- Rainer distinguishes between healthy criticism & toxic patterns that threaten the health and mission of the congregation

■ Seeking Silver Bullets No More

- These churches abandoned the search for a quick fix or “magic program” that promised growth without effort (e.g., just getting a new pastor, changing the paint color, or implementing a canned curriculum)
- They embraced the painful reality that revitalization is a slow, hard, intentional process that requires comprehensive, deep effort & time

40

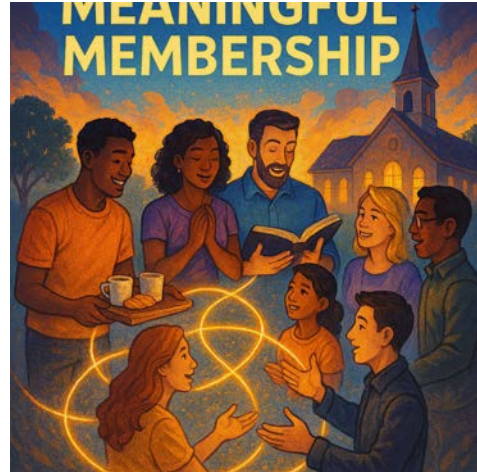
40

HOW TO REVIVE A DYING CHURCH (5/5)

■ Choosing Meaningful Membership

- Churches transitioned from having passive, nominal members (i.e., people on a roster who haven't attended in years) to establishing meaningful membership standards
- This involves creating new member classes that set clear expectations for involvement, stewardship, and assimilation into active ministry

It must be mutually beneficial.



41

41

Reviving & Maintaining God's Ecclesia

The Ecclesia: A Journey from Foundation to Future

FOUNDATIONS AND ANCIENT ROOTS



Establishing the Biblical Construct

Laying the groundwork for understanding the foundational nature of the Ecclesia.



The Wilderness and Promised Land

Examining the early Ecclesia during the journey of the Children of Israel.



Christ and the First Century

Insights gained from Christ's initiation of the original first-century Ecclesia.



Persistence Through the Centuries

Proof that God's word and the Ecclesia have never died out.



Addressing Modern Spiritual Crises

An urgent call for communal action to face contemporary faith challenges.



Revival and the Kingdom Age

Strategies for avoiding spiritual death and maintaining the Ecclesia's future.



42