Last Rites for a Dying Church

by Marc Woodson

I have a friend who refuses to make a will or a trust for fear that these documents will actually hasten his death. Talk about denial! If the world lasts long enough, we are all going to die.

Believe it or not, churches can also die. Like all living organisms, local congregations go through a life cycle - they are born, grow, mature, begin to decline, and may ultimately die - some faster than others. While it is easy to observe this life cycle among human beings, it is much harder to see it in the life of the local church.

Dying Churches

A recent study by LifeWay Research discovered that approximately 22 percent of the more than 1,000 pastors they surveyed strongly or somewhat agree that their congregations are dying. Some experts estimate that one in four American churches - around 100,000 - fit the description of a "dying church." But what exactly is a dying church? Read More.

Join the discussion of facebook.

Marc Woodson is executive secretary for the Northern California Conference

Reading: Gas in the Tank

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Proverbs 18:15

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The first step in this journey is to remember that we read not only for entertainment, but for future application. Therefore we need to encode our reading - we need to intelligently digest and internalize what we read. This requires us to tag, then cliff what we read.

I tag things by using a pen and highlighter as I read. My children always joke that they have never seen me without a pen and a highlighter. Whether I am at home, the office, in my car, or even on vacation, I've got my books, a pen, and a highlighter.
According to Adventist Review magazine, “Logos is believed to be the first non-Adventist publisher to create a position specifically aimed at serving the Adventist market.” Weber is collaborating with SDA publishers and authors to incorporate denominational products into the unique Logos “ecosystem” of more than 37,000 resources.

Weber is also bringing vintage SDA materials to Logos, such as the earliest editions of Ministry magazine, available at a Pre-Publication discount. Be sure to check out Logos’ new SDA landing page: www.logos.com/ada

Wise Words: Christmas

If you hitch your wagon to a star, be sure it's the Star of Bethlehem. - Unknown

The hinge of history is on the door of a Bethlehem stable. - Ralph W. Sockman

The best Christmas gift of all is the presence of a happy family all wrapped up with one another. - Unknown

Let's approach Christmas with an expectant hush, rather than a last-minute rush. - Unknown

Unless we make Christmas an occasion to share our blessings, all the snow in Alaska won't make it 'white'. - Bing Crosby

When we were children we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmas time. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs? - Gilbert K. Chesterton

When the wrappings and ribbons are in the trash, the manger scene is back in the attic, the friends and family have said good-bye, and the house feels empty and so do you - there is One who waits to fill your heart and renew your hope. - Charles R. Swindoll

God always wanted to get the attention of human beings. He wanted to matter to us because we matter to Him. He wants to be family. God had a difficult time getting our attention. Thunderstorms, wind, floods and fire worked temporarily. Dramatic events soon faded from the memory of God's people. So Jesus was born. God became helpless, dependent, little and weak. He grew up to serve and suffer and save. He still wants to be a family. - Unknown

Let's Talk: Ask a Seasoned Pastor

If you could sit down with a seasoned pastor and get advice on your one burning issue in ministry right now, what would it be? Tell us about it at Best Practices for Adventist Ministry. Then look for our answer in an upcoming issue.

Ideas, Events, Resources, Announcements

Seventh-day Adventists are a global family of faith. The Adventist People Connected video shows how the church is organized and how its people around the world are connected.

Have you ever tried an iPad Garage Band at church? Check out this All Creatures of Our God and King offertory recently performed at the Florida Hospital Church.

If you are already in the M.A. in Pastoral Ministry Program (MAPMin), or are just thinking about it, we want you to know that due to an unexpected turn of events we have two MAPMin classes that will be offered at the seminary January 12-16 and January 19-22, 2014.

Previous resource links:

- My Way to Jesus
- Prodigal Pastor Kids: Fact or Fiction
- The One Project
- Just Claim It 4
- NAD Prayer Conference
- Adventist Ministries Convention
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Author and church consultant Thomas Rainer defines a dying church as “a congregation that will close its doors within 20 years if it continues its current trajectory.” He goes on to clarify that a church’s trajectory takes into account many factors including attendance, financial giving, demographic trends, and the age of the church members.

In his book, Waking the Dead: Returning Plateaued and Declining Churches to Vibrancy, Russell Burrill estimates that 80 to 85 percent of all Adventist churches in the North American Division are either plateaued or declining, based on the same set of factors. This means it is possible that a large majority of Adventist congregations in North America could be considered to be dying.

While much has been written in recent years about the resuscitation of dying churches, there are still too many churches that hold little hope of being revived. Thus we must ask a few basic questions: When is it appropriate to close a church? What are the factors that indicate a local congregation is near death? And what should be done once a church has closed its doors?

The Right Time

Knowing the right time to close a church can be difficult. One respected Adventist leader believes that a congregation is headed for certain death the moment it refuses to create a new vision for itself. As mentioned earlier: attendance, finance, demographic, and membership trends can indicate a dying pulse in a church. I would add to these factors a congregation’s lost sense of mission and purpose.

Here are some additional indicators that it may be time to close a church:

- If the worship attendance has declined seven of the past ten years.
- If overall financial giving has declined in at least seven of the past ten years.
- If the church looks less like its surrounding community than it did ten years ago.
- If there are significantly more church conflicts than in past years.
- If the church’s budget has decreased its focus on outreach and evangelism.
- If the average age of the congregation has been much higher than the national average for seven of the last ten years.
If there have been few new members added in the past ten years.

While this is not an exhaustive list of indicators, it can provide a good starting point for further discovery and assessment.

In one Adventist conference, there is a systematic process for determining a church’s future viability. Congregations may be subject to a review when a certain set of factors is demonstrated, such as when weekly worship attendance falls below 50 or when tithe falls below $50,000 for one year. When any of these factors occurs, the conference establishes a specially selected committee to review and assess that church’s future potential. This review — which can take up to one year — helps determine whether the church should cease to exist or not.

**Saying Goodbye**

When a friend or family member dies, it is important to give their loved ones an opportunity to say goodbye. That is why we have funeral and memorial services. I believe that congregations need the same opportunity when their church dies.

This is a time to celebrate the life the church once enjoyed. This is a time to gather conference officials, current and former pastors, current and former members, local church and community leaders for a special time of remembrance. Such a celebration can include a reading of the church’s history, personal testimonies by the church members, a prayer of thanksgiving, and a documentation of the church’s many accomplishments through the years.

**Why?**

While the whole thing it can be painful — just like any other loss — the death of a church can actually bring benefits. The death of a congregation in one place may help bring life to a congregation in another place. Those who have said goodbye to their former church may find a new sense of purpose in a different congregation. Perhaps a new, more vibrant ministry can be established in another place, where its presence will have a greater impact.

Some churches die because financial and human resources are no longer available to sustain them. Rather than stretching to cover a few struggling ministries, those same resources can be added to an existing, growing congregation — and make a difference.

One more thing — please remember that the death of a church is not always an admission of failure. While unpreventable circumstances and unique challenges may lead to a church’s demise, the closure of church very well may bring new opportunities to expand the kingdom of God, and to bring glory to His name.

*Marc Woodson is executive secretary for the Northern California Conference*
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I tag things by using a pen and highlighter as I read. My children always joke that they have never seen me without a pen and a highlighter. Whether I am at home, the office, in my car, or even on vacation, I’ve got my books, a pen, and a highlighter.

I tag things by underlining, which forces me to reread the sentence or paragraph. And I underline slowly, so I am sure to reread carefully. I also make notes in the margins as a means of interpreting the book for future reference. That way, if I don’t remember why I underlined the section, I have my own interpretive notes handy.

When I tag, I look for specific content. I love to tag great quotes, key points, or stories I like.

I also find it helpful to cliff. Everyone has a different system. Come up with one that works for you. I like to write notes on the first blank white page inside the book, and go from there. In the table of contents, I add one sentence summaries to the chapters I feel are worth remembering. More extensive summaries are placed on the chapter page.

The last part of a cliffing system involves writing your own quotables in the few blank pages before the back cover. These will serve you well when you prepare for a sermon or presentation. Again this is just one way to do it. I would encourage you to develop a system that works for you.

I would encourage you to think about how you process the books you read. As you read, review major sections before moving on. Whenever a reading session lasts longer than 30 minutes, pause to reflect on what you have been reading. Allow the ideas to connect in your head before you put them to paper.

Lastly, when you have finished the book, write a review. I have found this to be not only a helpful summary for myself, but a benefit to share with others.

Ron Aguilera is vice president of administration for the Illinois Conference
In the chaotic days following the Second World War, an immigrant family living in New York began to write letters to their surviving relatives back in Hungary. After what seemed like an eternity, they received a reply from Uncle Lazlo who lived just outside Budapest. He told them about the devastation and deprivation the family had suffered.

The family in New York made up their minds to send care packages to the family in Hungary — Meat and vegetables and chocolates. Toilet paper and band aids. And into all the empty spaces of the box they packed candies and handkerchiefs, writing paper and bandages. They shipped the boxes off one-by-one and waited to hear back from their loved ones in the mother land.

The day came when they finally got a letter from Uncle Lazlo: My Dearest Cousin, We are in receipt of three packages. We are forever in your debt for these good things. You cannot know how timely was their arrival. Food is so scarce here and Anna was sick all the time with fevers. This food has meant everything to us. I must confess that we sold some of the things you sent us on the black market in order to get money for our rent.

The letter went on to talk about almost every item in the boxes and what they had done with them — We also cannot ever thank you enough for the medicine you sent. It is so difficult to get any medicine at all and often it is of poor potency and doesn’t work at all. Cousin Gesher has been in continuous pain for several years and your medicine has miraculously cured him! He was walking only with the help of a cane. His knees were so swollen. These medicines make him almost normal again. My back pain is completely gone as are Lizabeta's headaches. America is great and science is great. You must send more of that medicine as it is nearly used up. Again, thank you. We love you all and pray for when we might see you once more.

The letter drove the family in New York crazy — What was the medicine they had sent their loved ones in Hungary? They just had to know so they could send more.

So they wrote another letter. Two months later they heard back from Uncle Lazlo — My Dearest Cousins, Uncle Lazlo wrote. We are grateful to have heard from you again. Since the first three packages, another two have arrived, and then your letter. Again, you sent that wonderful medicine. It did not come with instructions for use but we are guessing on the dosage. And translating from English to Hungarian is very difficult for us since only young Sandor has studied it in school. Lucky for us he could translate the name of the medicine. It is "Life Savers." Please send more as soon as you can. Love, Lazlo

Imagine that — the filler in those care packages had been rolls of Life Saver candy! A literal translation of the name had turned America’s favorite candy into a source of great hope.

We all need hope — Hope beyond the devastation and deprivation of our lives. You can live without food for a month or more. You can live without water for a few days. But life without hope will take you down in no time flat. Hope is essential to every area of life — Hope brings meaning to your life and strength for the journey as you lean into the future.

Adapted from Hanoch McCarty’s To Save a Life, in A Fourth Course of Chicken Soup for the Soul