

Thom Rainer is the guest speaker at our denomination's annual meeting in June of this year. He is the president and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources. He writes on all sorts of issues facing the Christian church today. Here's one example, with my thoughts in brackets and in blue.

Pastor Josh

### **The Number One Reason for the Decline in Church Attendance and Five Ways to Address It by Thom Rainer**

Few people will argue that church attendance in many churches in America is declining. Our own research indicates that the majority of churches in our country are not growing.

Most of us have our own ideas why attendance is declining. Many have suggested that our nation is shifting away from its Christian roots, and thus the churches are declining as a smaller proportion of our country are believers in Christ.

I certainly will not argue with that premise. Certainly attendance declines are related to massive cultural shifts in our nation. But I would also suggest that one reason for declines has a greater impact than others.

#### **The Frequency Issue**

Stated simply, the number one reason for the decline in church attendance is that members attend with less frequency than they did just a few years ago. Allow me to explain.

If the frequency of attendance changes, then attendance will respond accordingly. For example, if 200 members attend every week the average attendance is, obviously, 200. But if one-half of those members miss only one out of four weeks, the attendance drops to 175.

[For what it's worth, if everyone who is associated with Perrow showed up together, we'd be over the 200 mark in attendance.]

Did you catch that? No members left the church. Everyone is still relatively active in the church. But attendance declined over 12 percent because half the members changed their attendance behavior slightly.

This phenomenon can take place rather quickly in an individual church. And leaders in the church are often left scratching their heads because the behavioral change is so slight, almost imperceptible. We really don't notice when someone who attends four times a month begins to attend only three times a month. Nor do we typically catch it when the twice-a-month attendee becomes a once-a-month attendee.

## Five Possible Approaches to the Problem

Of course, the heart of the problem is not declining numbers but waning commitment. As I addressed in my book, *I Am a Church Member*, church membership is becoming less and less meaningful in many churches. As membership becomes less meaningful, commitment naturally wanes.

While I don't want to suggest there is a magic bullet to this problem, I do want to offer some approaches to address it. These five have proven to be the most helpful in hundreds of churches:

1. **Raise the expectations of membership.** You may be surprised how many church members don't really think it's that important to be an active part of the church. No one has ever told them differently. [This is something that the elder's are seriously considering. Right now there aren't really any "expectations" of members. Meaning there's no expectation in attendance, giving, serving, participating in Community Groups, etc...other than "you should" do those things. But "should" isn't really an expectation. The Session recently clarified what are the "5 Expectations" that we'd like every Perrow member to meet. We'll be talking more about those "5 Expectations" in the Fall.]
2. **Require an entry class for membership.** By doing so, the church makes a statement that membership is meaningful. The class should also be used to state the expectations of what a committed member looks like. [Since I (Pastor Josh) have been here, every new member has gone through a membership class. My guess is that there's been some sort of membership class for a long time at Perrow. The issue is that every membership class has been different! In the Fall, I will be putting together a short video series with the "expectation" being that all current members and future members will be expected to participate in. This will help all of us be on the "same page" when it comes to membership at Perrow Church.]
3. **Encourage ministry involvement.** Many members become less frequent attendees because they have no ministry roles in the church. They do not feel like they are an integral part of the church. [This is a critical step in our discipleship process at Perrow and we are thankful that many of you are serving regularly. Two thoughts comes to mind in regards to serving at Perrow. First, is that we want there to be an "expectation" that serving is important for every one of our members. No matter your age, stage of life, work schedule, etc...every one of our members has been given a spiritual gift by God's Spirit, which Perrow Church needs in order for us to grow to our full potential (see Ephesians 4:12-16). Second, we don't want our members to feel like they are "cogs in the wheel" or simply serving in a position that keeps the "church going." Yes, there are serving opportunities that need to be

filled at times, but Perrow Church will be at its best when its members take “ownership” of using their gifts for the sake of the rest of the congregation.

4. **Offer more options for worship times.** Our culture is now a 24/7 population. Some members have to work during the times of worship services. If possible, give them options. One businessman recently told me that he changed congregations to a church that offered a Saturday worship time because his job required him to catch a plane on Sunday morning. [Of all of the points that Rainer makes, this is my least favorite. I understand that people “have to work”, but there’s also a factor of what is realistic for our congregation at this time and the volunteers it would take to make another worship service happen. Here would be my suggestion as to how this would work best: Those people who need an alternative time take “ownership” of that service and don’t depend on other people to make it happen for them. It’s a bad idea to make our worship services a product to be consumed instead of something that our members are investing in personally. Oh, and I’m willing to preach any time, any place, so I’ve got that part of a service covered for you.]
5. **Monitor attendance of each member.** This approach is often difficult, especially for worship attendance. That is why the traditional Sunday school approach of calling absentees was so effective. Perhaps churches can incorporate that approach in all groups. Members are less likely to be absent if they know someone misses them. [Every week I ask you to fill out a Connection Card. Some of you are better at doing this than others. Right now, there’s no real incentive to fill one out because there is no “expectation” for attendance. But as I said above, be looking for the Session’s “5 Expectations” in the Fall. And attendance is definitely going to be one of our “expectations.”

### **When Church Membership Becomes Meaningful**

People want to be a part of something that makes a difference. They desire to be involved in something bigger than themselves.

Unfortunately, in many churches membership has become less and less meaningful. Until we get our churches back to the committed membership the Apostle Paul mandates in 1 Corinthians 12, we will continue to see declining attendance. But when membership becomes truly meaningful, our churches will become an unstoppable force for the Kingdom and glory of God.