

The Lakeview Lamp

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” – Psalm 119:105

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Turnaround at Thayer Street

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People familiar with the Thayer Street congregation in Akron, Ohio, have known of the church’s decline in number for several years. As with other situations of this kind, their concern about this matter has caused them to wonder what could be done to stay the decline and reverse the situation. The factors leading to this decline were such that little could be done to overcome its full force. The aging of the church’s members and the natural decline of a neighborhood cannot be quickly or easily dealt with.

During a recent visit to Thayer Street, this writer joyously observed the turnaround that has begun there. On many occasions he has visited the congregation to preach or simply to meet with the Christians, because of family connections going back to the 1960s. What was once a vibrant church became, in more recent years, “a shrunken hull of what it once had been.” It appeared that almost irresistible forces were working to undermine the work and to deplete the numbers. Neither doctrinal error, immoral conduct, complacency, nor contentious attitudes provided the impetus to this downward spiral. The usual, valiant effort of the elders and the other members of the body continued in the face of discouraging circumstances. For some years it really seemed to some in the church that the end was approaching, when it would be wise for the people to go their separate ways and join with other Christians in the Akron area. Efforts to reach the people of the North Hill community had been made at different times, with little encouraging result. The number fell to the point that Wednesday night attendance was sometimes in the high 30s. What could be done? This question occupied the minds and prayers of many.

It is hoped that this article highlighting the turnaround of one congregation will provide both information and encouragement to others in similar situations. While various aspects of local-church situations will differ, it is possible for there to be other Thayer Streets across the land. Where faith, love, and hope reside, there can and will be courageous endeavors to honor God and exalt Christ in local congregations. The example of one such group of the Lord’s people can supply the needed insight and motivation to deal with similar situations elsewhere.

Some Light from the History of the Congregation

Knowledge of the church’s past might cause some to wonder how such a development could take place. The once-large church drew from the entire area in Akron’s distant past. The initial group of Christians that led to Thayer Street’s formation dates back to 1912. After meeting in private homes, schools, and another church building, the congregation moved to Thayer Street in 1927, when nearly three hundred assembled for the first service in the new facility. The largest growth recorded took place from 1932 to 1941. Approximately six hundred then made up the attendance. The church beginning with eight families in 1912 eventually led to six other local churches in the area.

In the 1970s retiring members of the church began moving to the South and Southwest. Over the next two decades this trend continued, with the added effect of many deaths in the aging group. Some moved from the neighborhood to more desirable neighborhoods and attended elsewhere. For many years some had driven to Thayer Street from other parts of the Akron area, but the profound difference that soon became discernible was that many were driving some distance and few living in the neighborhood. The effect of these changes, first subtle but later pronounced, was a depletion of the number of people in the church.

Changes in the Late 1990s

During that recent visit to Thayer Street, the changes were remarkable. While there are not as many classes as there once were, those classes now meeting have many more people in them than just a few years ago. Many more young people and young adults now make up the group at Thayer Street. The number now reaches from the high 70s to the 90s. The contribution now makes it possible for the congregation to extend its influence even further, as it once did. What factors contributed to this turnaround?

It is this writer's understanding that a class held at the home of the Morris Normans, then working with the Barberton church, deserves some credit for its part in allowing the young people of the area to meet for study, singing, and visiting. Five or six Thayer Street young people participated in this class; out of it came more zealous and diligent Christians. One young man who deserves particular mention for his role in encouraging other young people to come to Thayer Street, even some college friends who moved from other states to work in Akron, is Kenny Pitman. Some close to the scene credit him for much work in this area. Some of the "native" young people from Thayer Street have worked to convert their friends and school associates, with good effect. Even now such an effort is being made.

With no desire to disparage any of the good and faithful men who have preached the gospel there, mention must be made of the present preacher — Don Wright. He came into a quite difficult situation and has worked much to help overcome it. He has related well to all of the people — young and old, mature Christians and new converts, and the lost. His work with the college and young married people's class has been a bright star in the work in recent years.

While this article stresses human activity, it is incorrect to think that such, apart from God's blessing, can accomplish anything. People are needed to plant and water, but God alone can give the yield (**1 Cor. 3:7**). Never try to eliminate the divine part, and never forget to include it! Saints have often failed to pray as they ought.

Lessons to Be Learned

There can be progress in difficult situations, if we do not allow discouragement to overcome us. Faith in God's promises and persistent prayer will bring about growth, when combined with sowing the seed of the kingdom (**Matt. 13:23**). May we never fail to trust God to do what he has promised. We must be optimistic!

Growth can take place without the fads and gimmicks that have been favored so much in recent years. Building gymnasiums, offering community-interest classes, and feeding the body will never achieve what God desires in a local church. No one can ever improve on God's means and methods. When we faithfully use the Scriptures to

News and Notes

* If anyone has lost a cell phone, then please see Troy.

Members:

- * Cotton Read's eyes are doing better after getting some salve at the doctor.
- * Nancy Read is waiting for a report on some skin cancers.
- * Ame White has had more pain than usual this week.

Friends and Family:

- * Michael Read, **the Read's son, had successful reconstructive colon surgery.**
- * Jack Reiger is in Summit Medical Center with shingles. He is doing well and may go home this afternoon or tomorrow.

Absent: Holt family (PM only), Nicholson children (AL).

New Reports: Gary Hunt (NY), Chad Lynn (WV), Bob Nichols (Japan).

convert the lost and to plant local churches, we are doing all that God wants us to do and all that we should desire to do (**1 Tim. 3:15f**).

The Lord's people must view their connection with a local church as a "giving" one instead of a "getting" one. They need to be part of a work to help, not just to be helped. At times they need to join forces with small works, even when they do not have a desirable number of children for all the classes. When they take their own children there, there will be more children for the classes, so that others will be more interested in casting their lot with them in the future. Many congregations would never have begun with the spirit of "getting." Just as Jesus came to serve, not to be served, so must each of us seek to serve a need. Is it possible that you are more needed elsewhere?

Faithful, effective elders can fortify members over many years to have the spiritual stamina needed for the "lean times." Possibly this is one of their most needed works. Every congregation will pass through some trying experiences, some unavoidable and others inexcusable. Spiritual growth is part of the equipping of the saints to be managed by spiritual shepherds (**Eph. 4:11ff**).

It is hoped that this review of the Thayer Street situation will bring enlightenment to the mind, determination to the will, and joy and hope to the heart. While it probably is true that some churches need to disband and go elsewhere, others need to hold to God's unchanging hand and keep on. It is clear, however, that some special people with certain abilities are needed in such situations to achieve special results. May each one do his best to obey the Lord, depending on him to bless as he sees fit.



Will you be among the "zealous and diligent Christians" that help the turnaround here at Lakeview? What are you giving? Are you praying for God's help?