

In praise of folly: Congregational messes

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

I went to look for “Main’s Folly” the other day. It’s at the back of the church property, down the old road to the back and left at the Chinaberry grove where I used to preach every Easter. Go past the rock altar and head toward the ring of stones where we cooked hot dogs back in the old days. Main’s Folly is about ten steps and five years past the cactus patch where Sarah saw that snake.

The year was 1999, and we were finally ready to construct a church building. For reasons that I can no longer remember, we decided to clear the site ourselves. It took us six weeks, and we saved only \$1,000. If you’re thinking in terms of time and money, it was one of the dumbest things we ever did. If you’re thinking in terms of church and relationships, it was the best six weeks in the history of our congregation.

The foliage was so thick you couldn’t even walk on the building site. We cleared it with chainsaws, bow saws, clippers and even bare hands. Somewhere along the way we developed a system. Four or five men would cut down the trees and brush. Others would drag the debris out of the way, piling it in open spaces. Still others would throw ropes and chains around these piles and haul them to the clearing at the back of the land with a beat-up old brown pickup truck that someone loaned us.

At the end of a long day, we might have two or three giant piles of tree trunks, limbs and brush. It fell to Michael Main and me to burn these piles.

Michael works odd hours and was free during the day. I’m free whenever I need to be free, so we were chosen, or as we like to say around here, “We were volunteered.”

I remember how worried we were the first time we tried to set one of these brush piles on fire. We were afraid it might get out of control. We nervously stood before a ten-foot- high, 15-foot-wide mound with a can of lighter fluid and a couple of

matches. I squirted a modest amount around the bottom of the pile and stood back while Michael threw the match.

That's when we discovered that it's surprisingly difficult to set things on fire. Now I marvel at stories of people casually throwing cigarettes out of their cars and setting whole forests ablaze.

We tried a number of things before we discovered the magic formula. Three or four gallons of diesel and a butane blowtorch are what you need. Trust me on this.

It takes about five hours to burn a giant pile of brush and cedar, so Michael and I would start a fire, then sit on the tailgate of the truck and talk while we kept an eye on it. Apart from the searing heat and our looking like chimney sweeps, it was loads of fun. I'm always looking for guilt-free reasons to sit around and shoot the bull with Michael. I don't suppose I'll ever have as good an excuse as I did then.

Apart from the clearing and burning—and praying that no one would cut off his arm with a chainsaw—we had another pressing issue: cactus. Prickly-pear cactus, to be specific. Our property is covered with it. And getting rid of prickly-pear cactus isn't easy. You can't burn it because it's mostly water. You can't just chop it down and toss it aside because it takes root wherever it lands.

I'm pretty sure you could throw a piece of prickly-pear cactus out your car window while speeding down the interstate and it would take root right there in the fast lane.

Michael and I discovered that if we shoveled cactus into the center of a raging bonfire, it could be burned. But the fire had to be well established and hotter than hell to do the job.

I think we were sitting on the tailgate when Michael came up with a brilliant idea for getting rid of the brush and the cactus at the same time. Instead of making a giant pile of wood, lighting it on fire, then digging up cactus and throwing it onto the flames, Michael wondered why we didn't just pile the brush in the center of a cactus patch to begin with. Then we could set the brush on fire and let it burn the cactus after it got hot enough.

I thought this was a capital idea, a good example of the kind of creative ingenuity that can surface when two intelligent and well-meaning men are allowed to sit around for hours making fire.

The next time we had a work day, we told the folks dragging the brush behind the pickup to pile it on top of a massive cactus patch near the old campfire ring and not too far from where we used to hold Easter services. In no time they had a seven- or eight-foot pile in the center of a 20-foot wide cactus patch.

A few days later, Michael and I showed up to burn it. We gleefully poured diesel fuel on the wood, lit it and stepped back to watch the cactus die. Unfortunately, it was the fire that died.

Undaunted, we doubled the amount of diesel and tried again. No good. The fuel burned away, leaving some of the wood darkened and smoldering, but the fire wouldn't catch. We couldn't get the fire going because of the water-laden cactus at the bottom of the pile. We couldn't burn the wood, and wading into the cactus patch to haul it away was out of the question.

So we did what city boys do when Mother Nature gets the best of them. We went home to watch TV.

We figured that the pile would decay and go away all by itself. Eventually. We couldn't guess how long this might take, but we hoped that with clean living and lots of prayer, we might live long enough to see it for ourselves.

It was Michael who dubbed this hideous, blackened pile of cactus and rotting wood "Main's Folly." And there it stood for all to see, a testimony to what happens when good intentions are mixed with gross ignorance. In all fairness, it may have been Michael's idea, but I went right along with him. If this was folly, we shared it equally.

As the years have gone by, other plans have gone awry around here, leaving similar monuments to the best of intentions. It has become traditional to name these monuments after the person who was in charge.

There's a stack of neatly cut cedar that Ben placed near the church to be used for firewood. Only later did he discover that you shouldn't burn cedar in a fireplace. That pile of wood is still there. Michael and I call it Ben's Folly.

When we constructed our second building, a group of overly energetic men cut down about 30 cedar trees and created the largest monument of all. Sadly, they created it so close to some living trees that we couldn't burn it. It sat at the end of our parking lot, a rotting eyesore, until we got someone with a tractor to haul it away.

I hate to mention the small-group initiative that I once started, wherein the entire church was divided into groups that would meet in homes for fellowship and spiritual edification. I was going to change the very culture of our congregation. The only problem was that no one wanted to do it, so they didn't. I still have the map that I used to plan the small-group revolution. Preacher's Folly, you might call it.

People come and go over the years, bringing good ideas and bad ones. Over time we accumulate a few monuments to our follies.

Welcome to church.

As I said when I started this tale, the old clearing has changed. If you look closely you can see charred wood and old stumps. But to my surprise, Main's Folly is nowhere to be found. Unless you know what you're looking for, all you'll see is a very ordinary patch of prickly-pear cactus.

Nature has been hard at work these six years. A power greater than ourselves has cleaned up our mess and taken away our sins.

Like I said, welcome to church.