

What Are People Looking For?

Introduction. There have been numerous studies done on reaching the unchurched, most of which conduct surveys of people who are not going to church to ask them what they would like to see in a congregation.

The result has been that the unchurched are setting the agenda to control the work of the church in many denominations. These churches have been told that a certain worship style, the "right church name," a music ministry and ministries to various perceived needs are necessary to reach the unchurched. Many have been told that much of the preaching is irrelevant, judgmental and drives away visitors. However, these conclusions are now being challenged.

As Thom Rainer addressed the issue of reaching the unchurched in his book *Surprising Insights From The Unchurched*, he took a different approach by surveying those who had recently started going to church (changing from unchurched to church). He was surprised by his findings. There are a number of myths that we need to examine to help us understand people as we try to teach them.

I. ***They Are Turned Off By Denominational Names In The Church Name***

- A. Rainer said, "For the most part, neither the presence nor the absence of a denominational name influenced the formerly unchurched's decision to attend a congregation" (38).
- B. One person is quoted as saying, "'The name of the church never really entered my mind. I didn't have a clue what a Wesleyan church was, but that's not what got me interested in the church.' ... 'After all,' Mark reflected, 'I really don't choose a store because of its name. What does 'Wal-Mart' mean anyway?'" (39).
- C. Perhaps some of our brethren need to reconsider their efforts to change the signs on their building from "Church of Christ" to "Christians meet here." As a matter of fact, one effect that the name of a church did have on the unchurched was that established names reassured the person that they were not becoming a part of "some wacko cult" (40).
- D. When God named His church, we have to use those names (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Hebrews 12:23). Will we be ashamed of those names?

II. ***They Cannot Be Reached By Direct Personal Evangelism***

- A. Many of those who began going to church started because of direct personal contact from someone affiliated with the church.

- B. Over 50% said that they were influenced by someone from the church talking directly to them about their soul (43).
- C. The pattern of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) or Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42) still needs to be followed today because it can still be effective today. Personal contact is the top way to convert souls to Christ (Proverbs 11:30).

III. ***They Do Not Understand Deep And Complex Biblical Truths***

- A. This area of the study contained some of the most surprising information. The survey found that the two most important factors influencing a person's decision to join a church was the preacher/preaching (90%) and doctrines (88%) (21).
- B. "The number one reason given for a choice of a particular church was the theological beliefs and doctrines of that church" (21). One person complained about her visits to area churches by saying, "'You know what frustrated me the most when I started visiting churches?' Susan M. asked us. Susan was a lifelong unchurched person living in the Cleveland area until a life crisis prompted her to seek God. She tried to find Him and His truth in the churches she visited. 'What really frustrated me was that I had a deep desire to understand the Bible, to hear in-depth preaching and teaching,' she continued. 'But most of the preaching was so watered-down that it was insulting to my intelligence. I went to one church where the message was on fear. I was eager to hear what the Bible had to say about a subject that described my state of mind.'"
- C. However, she was deeply disappointed with what she heard. She said, "It was more of a pop-psychology message. The biblical view was never explained. Bible texts were hardly mentioned." Another person said, "We attended a lot of different churches for different reasons before we became Christians. I tell you so many of the preachers spoke with little authority; they hardly ever dealt with tough issues of scripture, and the soft-sold the other issues. Frank and I know now that we were hungry for the truth. Why can't preachers learn that shallow and superficial preaching doesn't help anybody, including people like us who weren't Christians?" (62). Rainer quotes another person as saying, "I visited a few churches before I became a Christian.... They didn't show any more conviction about their beliefs than I did. And I was lost and going to hell!" (127).
- D. A remarkable 91% of the formerly unchurched indicated that doctrine was an important fact that attracted them to the church (45). Rainer wrote, "Now we are hearing from the formerly unchurched that preaching that truly teaches the Bible in its original context is a major factor in reaching the unchurched. Indeed, this issue was mentioned

by 211 of the 353 survey respondents. The formerly unchurched told us that they were attracted to strong biblical teaching and to understanding Christian doctrine" (58). Churches which have no sense of certitude in their preaching are not likely to grow. "Wishy-washy" preaching is not going to reach the unchurched. Another respondent stated, "I didn't have a church background, but I sure could tell a lot about churches after a visit or two. There was this one church where the preacher went through all sorts of gyrations to say nothing. It was like he was afraid he would offend somebody. Personally, I was offended that he was such a dud. I could've turned on the TV and watched *The Simpsons* and learned as much about the Bible" (134).

- E. We must treat people like they are capable of coming to a knowledge of the truth and then teaching them that truth (Ephesians 3:3-5; 5:17). In a world of moral relativity, many people want to know that black and white really does exist.

IV. ***They Will Not Be Persuaded Unless They Hear A Dynamic And Charismatic Preacher***

- A. This was not confirmed by research. A preacher who displayed humility, love toward those with whom he was working, passion about what he was preaching and conviction was just as effective in reaching the unchurched as were dynamic speakers.
- B. People who were interviewed stated that they wanted preaching that teaches the Bible, preaching that applied to their life and a man who had conviction. This is not a matter of us changing to meet people's desires. Interestingly enough, people wanted what was found in the scriptures (1 Timothy 4:6; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; 4:1-2)!

V. ***They Are Not Influenced By Bible Classes And Other Small Groups***

- A. The survey confirmed that many of the unchurched were attracted to the Bible classes offered by the church. Nearly 70% of the formerly unchurched were active in the Bible classes offered by the congregation.
- B. Bible classes are a worthy expedient to achieve the goals of edification (Romans 15:2; Ephesians 4:15-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11). However, many of our Bible classes are simply boring because the teacher just does not take it very seriously. One of the first elements a new couple examines when they look for a congregation with which to worship is quality Bible classes. Are they bright, cheerful and up-to-date? If not, the couple may look elsewhere for a congregation that is more attentive to the opportunities found within Bible classes.
- C. I fear that sometimes we send a message to kids that what is in the Bible classroom is not as important as the school classroom. High

quality teachers will help growth because when the children are excited, the parents are excited.

VI. ***They Are Unaffected By Unfriendliness***

- A. Rainer calls attention to the effect that friendliness has on reaching the unchurched. He observed that almost all churches “think they are friendly churches.” He commented, “Most church members believe they are friendly when in reality they are friendly only to others whom they already know” (96).
- B. Manufactured friendliness is almost as bad as being unfriendly. When visitors come, sometimes they have to enter a strange place in which they know no one and negotiate where they should be without help.
- C. Churches need to be aware of their visitors. Every member should be looking at the audience to see if there are visitors present and then make an effort to visit with them. Get to know who they are, where they live, where they work, is there some crisis in their life that has motivated them to come to church, etc. Show yourself friendly and interested in them, not because it is expected of you, but because you are genuinely interested in converting them (Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 5:10; 1 Peter 4:9; 3 John 5-8).

Conclusion. There are other points that are worth nothing from this book on reaching the unchurched. Many positive points that are recommended: (1) If preaching is so important in reaching the lost, the preacher must take the time necessary to study; (2) a church without strong conviction that the unchurched are lost will not have a strong evangelistic work and will not grow; and (3) the manner in which one keeps the building facilities (clean or unkept, if the bathrooms have paper towels and toilet paper, if the classrooms are attractive, etc.) and how worship is conducted (whether it is the “throw it together at the last minute” approach or displays the best that one can give to the Lord) leave important first impressions on the visitors, influencing whether or not they come back. In fact, one respondent stated, “One church acted like they could care less about their facilities and ministries, and the other acted like they cared for people like me. The facilities and the preschool area are incredible in our church. Don’t some of these other churches realize that they’re telling people like me that God doesn’t matter to them? Don’t they realize that anything less than excellence for God is not good enough?”

Some final points to remember: (1) Studies show that 82% of the unchurched are at least “somewhat likely” to attend if they are invited; (2) only 21% of active churchgoers invite anyone to services in the course of a year; and (3) only 2% of church members invite any unchurched person to services. Could the evangelistic apathy in many churches be explained by simple

laziness on the part of church members in inviting others to worship services? Remember, 75% of people who were unchurched attended a worship service because of a friend or relative!

Let's do everything we can to stay true to the Bible and not compromise any precious doctrinal truths. We must also seize upon all the opportunities which come our way. With prayer, diligence and enthusiasm, we can plant and water effectively (1 Corinthians 3:6).

I am deeply indebted to Mike Willis and Thom Rainer for this material.