

Evangelgram

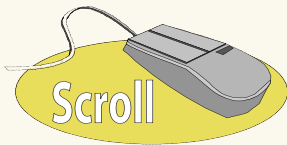
A MONTHLY E-PUBLICATION HIGHLIGHTING OUTREACH EFFORTS IN LCMS CONGREGATIONS



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Surprise, surprise!

The unchurched are open to visiting church, *if you would only invite them*. This and other findings as reported by Dr. Thom Rainer in part one of his article "Ten Surprises About the Unchurched."

Over the past few years, I have been privileged to enter a world that I really did not know very well—the world of the unchurched. Now, like many Christians, I have interacted with the unchurched, worked with the unchurched, socialized with the unchurched, and witnessed to the unchurched.

But I have been a Christian for more than 30 years. I really did not understand the hearts and the mindsets of the unchurched until recently.

For the past three years, my research team and I have been involved in extensive and intensive interaction with the unchurched. Our team talked to 308 men and women in all 50 states and Canada. We have been among a diversity of ethnic groups and socioeconomic groups. We have been in wide-ranging demographic areas, and we have talked to as many females as males. We have listened to the unchurched with modest education, and we listened to the unchurched with doctoral degrees.

A team of 17 men and women gave not only their time, but their hearts to this project. You will hear some fascinating information that we gleaned from our time with the unchurched.

Surprises, and then some

Here are four of the surprises our research uncovered about the unchurched (the other six will appear in the next issue). A surprise is only so in the eyes of the beholder, but the information you are about to read defies the conven-



tional wisdom about the unchurched. In many ways, it goes against the grain of some "truths" we have been told.

Every person interviewed was deemed to be both unchurched and non-Christian. While we asked some pre-determined objective questions, we also let the unchurched person speak freely. Some of the best interviews we had went off our planned script. And it was in those contexts that we often discovered some surprises. The surprises are not listed in any order or importance.

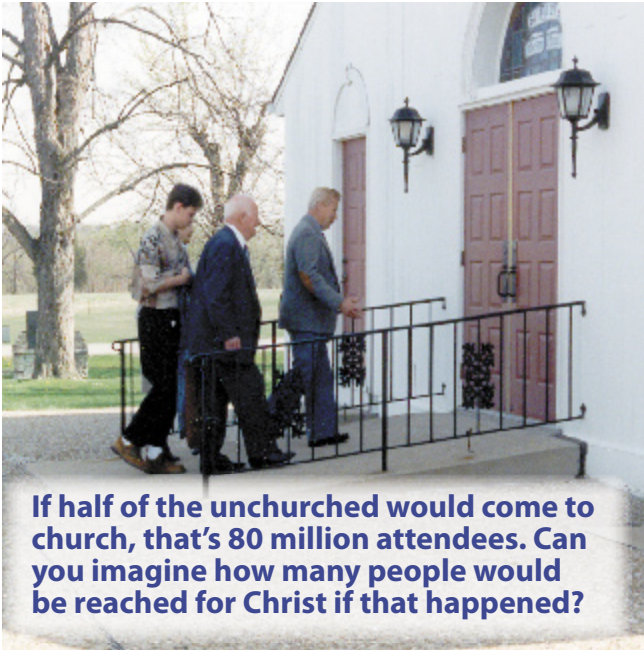
■ Surprise No. 1

Most of the unchurched prefer to attend church on Sunday morning, if they attend. Perhaps

the unchurched responded this way because that is the time they have always heard church should be. But when we asked the formerly unchurched (new Christians attending church) the same question, they gave us the same response. A very distant preference was a weeknight service other

Nine out of 10 unchurched people said they would come to church . . . if they were invited.

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If half of the unchurched would come to church, that's 80 million attendees. Can you imagine how many people would be reached for Christ if that happened?

than Friday night.

"If I attended church, it would be the only time I could go regularly," said Al V. of Tulsa. "I work five days a week, and I like to go home to my family at night. And we almost always have some activity that one of our kids is involved in on Saturdays. I just think Sunday is the best time. And Sunday morning is the best time, because we get the kids to bed at a decent hour on Sunday night."

Single adults and adults who must work on Sunday seem to prefer Saturday evening worship as a fairly strong second choice to Sunday morning.

■ Surprise No. 2

Most of the unchurched feel guilty about not attending church. Though we did not ask a specific question about their feelings about not attending church, the majority of the unchurched expressed guilt in different ways. These guilty feelings were especially prevalent among adults who had children living at home.

"Every Sunday morning I wake up and feel terrible about not taking Shanna and

Tim to church," Mary G. of Sarasota, Fla., said. "Mike [her husband] feels the same way. It's tough to start a habit of doing something you've never done before."

So, if they feel guilty, why did the unchurched continue to avoid church? As strange as it may seem to a church-going Christian, *the church intimidates the unchurched person*. They do not think they can fit in a place they have never attended. And they are uncertain about church protocol. They just fear that they will feel out of place.

Is there anything that could get the unchurched to attend church? That answer led us to the next surprise.

■ Surprise No. 3

Ninety-six percent of the unchurched are at least somewhat likely to attend church if they are invited. Perhaps we need to pause on this response. Perhaps we need to restate it. *More than nine out of 10 unchurched people said they would come to church if they were invited*. If you glean anything from this article, please remember this point.

We estimate that 160 million people in the United States are unchurched if we define unchurched as attending church two or less times in a year. If our research is close to accurate, the implications are staggering. More than 153 million people would start attending church if they were invited!

What constitutes an invitation?

For many of the unchurched, it was a simple invitation to come to one's church. For others, it was an invitation

that included an offer to meet someone at church to show them around or walk them in the building. In either case, the process was pretty basic. If we invite them, they will come.

We who are leaders in the church must challenge the church members. When is the last time they invited an unchurched person to church? When is the last time they offered to meet someone and show him or her around the church?

Are Christians inviting non-Christians to church?

The heartbreaking answer is "no." Perhaps the evangelistic apathy so evident in many of our church members can be explained by a simple laziness.

Walk with me through this calculation. Let us suppose that, instead of 96 percent, only half of the unchurched in America would come to church if invited. That means 80 million would be willing to come to church. Can you imagine how many people would be reached for Christ if that happened?

We who are leaders in the church must challenge the church members. When is the last time they invited an unchurched person to church? When is the last time they offered to meet someone and show him or her around the church?

The answers they give could make the difference in the eternal destiny of a person. Perhaps it is time we sounded the clarion call to invite the church. It may be that simple, and it may be that profound.

■ Surprise No. 4

Very few of the unchurched had someone share with them how to become a Christian. And Christians have not been particularly influential in their lives. The surprise is no longer a surprise in light of the previous discussion. If Christians do not invite non-Christians to church, we can't be surprised if they do not share the Gospel with or influence the unchurched.

Surprise, surprise (part 2)

The unchurched are open to visiting church, *if you would only invite them*. Below are several of the findings as reported by Dr. Thom Rainer in his article “Ten Surprises About the Unchurched.” Part 1 appeared last month; here’s part 2.

■ Surprise No. 5

Most of the unchurched have a positive view of pastors, ministers, and the church. Only a few said the ministers are hypocritical, are only after money, always drive nice cars, and have a condescending view of others. The scandals of televangelists and other Christian leaders are a faded memory for most of the unchurched.

Perhaps even more surprising was the generally positive attitude the unchurched had toward the church. For the vast majority of the unchurched, the church is still relevant today—in fact, many of them perceive the church to be the most relevant institution in society today.

This surprising response then begs another question: If the unchurched see the church in a positive light, and if they perceive the church to be relevant, why are they still unchurched?

The answer seems to be twofold. First, some of the unchurched have visited churches, but their experiences have been negative. Unfriendliness, unkempt facilities, poor signage, and general confusion have been some of the descriptions about the church from the unchurched.

The second reason for their not attending church takes us back to the third surprise. *Most of the unchurched have never been invited to church*. And most of them would attend if invited. If you get nothing else from this, hear the main point. The unchurched must be invited to church.

■ Surprise No. 6

Many of the unchurched have a church background. From the most recalcitrant unchurched person we encountered to the most receptive, many have



some type of church background.

Some had previously been members of churches and left for various reasons. Others visited one or more churches for a season. Others were taken to church as children.

The point is simple. Do not assume that all unchurched people are clueless about the church. A majority can recall many years of church in their past.

■ Surprise No. 7

Some types of “cold calls” (uninvited) are effective, many are not. A debate persists in the Christian community about the effectiveness of cold-call evangelism. The type of cold-call evangelism most often resisted by the unchurched is an uninvited visit to their homes.

“I really don’t mind talking to people from churches. But please don’t show up at my home without an invitation. It reminds me of telephone solicitation, only worse!”

Roger S., Wisconsin

The formerly unchurched agreed. These new Christians said that unexpected visitors in the home were rarely welcomed.

“I was most positively impacted by Christians who asked for permission to meet me or talk with me. The cold-call visitor to my home was a pain. I ended up accepting Christ through the witness of a church member who took me to lunch on three different occasions. I knew what her agenda was, but at least she

invited me to lunch.”

Sarah F., Alabama

But not all cold calls are ineffective, the unchurched told us. We heard numerous stories about Christians who always seemed to be able to share their faith in casual conversations. They were not invited by the unchurched to talk to them, but these churchgoers often seemed to find a way to move a conversation to eternal issues.

The bottom line of cold-call evangelism seems to be to make the most of every opportunity God gives you. Pray for such opportunities. But showing up at someone’s home without an invitation was one of the biggest turnoffs articulated by the unchurched.

“I would be glad for church people to come talk to me in my home. I just want to know when they’re coming.”

Millie B., Odessa, Texas

■ Surprise No. 8

The unchurched would like to develop a real and sincere relationship with a Christian. Our study of the unchurched continued during 2001 and 2002 with a noticeable intermediate point of Sept. 11, 2001. The attack on our nation engendered many questions from American citizens, and many of them were about God. Though the door was open for Christians to develop relationships with non-believers before Sept. 11, the opportunities increased after that infamous day.

The leader of our research team, Twyla Fagan, stated this issue clearly to me in a memo she wrote about the progress of our research project: “Most of the unchurched that the team is interviewing would respond positively to a ‘genuine’ Christian who would spend time with them in a gentle, non-judgmental relationship.

“Most of the unchurched can easily tell the difference between ‘drive-by’ evangelism and a person who really cares.”

I learned how to share my faith by reading *Evangelism Explosion* by Dr. James Kennedy. The manner in which Dr. Kennedy taught me how to start a conversation with a non-believer, and the way he taught me how to share a biblical plan of salvation, are infinitely invaluable to me.

Kennedy's book is one of the more popular training tools in personal witnessing. It belongs in a category of tools sometimes called "canned evangelism." The label is unfortunate because it implies an uncaring, notch-belt approach to evangelism.

But the book originated from the heart of a man who is passionate about the lost and deeply concerned for the unchurched. When Christians used a canned evangelism tool to witness to the unchurched with no obvious concern for the person, the unchurched immediately detected this impersonal approach.

"I had some people come to see me from the Baptist church just three blocks from here. I felt like they were meeting a soul quota with me. They just wanted to spill their presentation and move on. But I would've been happy to talk with them for a long time if I thought they really cared."

Monte G., Baltimore

The "soul quota" use of canned evangelism tools is neither the intent nor the desire of those who created these

programs. But many of the unchurched quickly recognized the abuse of these good tools.

If we who call ourselves Christians really believe that a person is lost outside of salvation through Christ, we would make the lost and the unchurched one of our highest priorities. And if we really had broken hearts for these unchurched persons, we would take whatever time is necessary to get to know them and to share the love of Christ in word and deed.

Winning the lost and reaching the unchurched is really no big mystery. There are millions of these men and women waiting for one of us Christians to spend time with them and to show them we really care. Jesus desired that none would perish. In the midst of His packed schedule, He took time to show His love to sinners. Are we willing to do likewise?

■ Surprise No. 9

The attitudes of the unchurched are not correlated to where they live, their ethnic or racial background, or their gender. The unchurched are not a monolithic group. That reality came through with the wide variety of responses we received.

One cannot therefore expect a certain attitude from an unchurched person from Georgia just because he or she lives in a Bible Belt state. And we could not describe to you the common characteristics of an Asian-American unchurched person. The variety of responses within each eth-

nic group was significant.

The only pattern where we saw any correlation was related to income. The higher an individual's income level, the more resistant to the Gospel he or she is likely to be.

■ Surprise No. 10

Many of the unchurched are far more concerned about the spiritual well-being of their children than themselves. A few years ago, my research team and I studied the Bridger generation, those born between 1977 and 1994. We discovered a large unchurched population among these young people, but we also discovered a generation highly receptive to the Gospel.

In my consultation ministry with the Rainer Group, I have found that churches that are highly intentional about reaching youth and children tend to be among the most evangelistic churches in America.

And in this research project, we found the unchurched with children at home are deeply concerned about the spiritual welfare of their children, even if they articulate little concern for themselves.

Perhaps in our encounters with these unchurched persons, we need to mention their children. Perhaps churches in America need to be more intentional in reaching children and youth. And perhaps we need to heed more closely the words of the Savior, who exhorted us to let the children come to Him. (Reprinted with permission of www.churchcentral.com)

What they're saying . . .

† *Keep yourself, and other's hearts, warm*

" . . . Cleopas and his friend went back to Jerusalem that same night to tell others about the Good News of Jesus. We also have been given the privilege to tell others about Jesus so their hearts may be warmed as well. So, as you seek to warm your body this winter, make it a goal to also warm other people's hearts with the Good News that in Jesus there is forgiveness, life, and salvation."

Rev. David Wagner, from the North Dakota District newsletter, March 2006

† *Holy Spirit works wonders!*

"I was raised a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and practiced devoutly all my life. For years,

I respected my friend for his values and morals, but I did not respect his faith.

"...He just continued to be firm in his own faith. His gentle evangelism has changed the course of my life. Over the last two years, I have fellowshiped with a sincere and loving Lutheran community, and my faith, gratitude, and amazement grows daily as I study His Word and recognize His hand and will in every detail of life.

"The Gospel is the sweetest gift any of us can offer one another; all else pales in comparison."

Letter from Lara Gale, college student; appeared in Rocky Mountain District newsletter, January 2007