

RESEARCH ON THE UNCHURCHED

Background

While there has been much written about reaching the unchurched, there has been very little done in the way of hard research and most of that is anecdotal. However, there are two studies that are worthy of note. They can be found in the following books:

- *Grow Your Church from the Outside In: Understanding the Unchurched and How to Reach Them*, by George Barna of the Barna Research Group.¹
- *The Unchurched Next Door*, by Thom S. Rainer of LifeWay Christian Resources (formerly dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.).²

These are not studies done from an Anglican/Episcopal perspective (there are none). In fact, both authors have a long association with the Southern Baptist Convention. However, valuable insights can be gained from a review of the results of these surveys. And where the conclusions are favorable to an Episcopal approach, we can have greater confidence.

Survey Results

The results of these surveys contain many surprises, dispelling much of what was thought to be common knowledge about the unchurched and how to reach them, especially many notions held by Episcopalians. For example, the unchurched have been commonly thought to be suspect of religions (Christianity in particular), yet this appears not to be the case. Certain strategies for reaching to the unchurched have been assumed to be successful across the board (e.g., seeker services, praise bands), yet this is far from the case.

The Church vs. the Unchurched. Perhaps the greatest surprise is this: the unchurched are not a monolithic block. In fact, they are not all that different from the church. And where they are different from the church, many of the differences favor an Anglican/Episcopal ethos and approach. For example, they tend to be:

- **Theologically Liberal – 46%.** The largest subset of the unchurched is theologically liberal, while 58% of the church are theologically conservative.
- **Open to New Experiences – 81%.** Compared to 76% of the church.

What the Unchurched Say About Themselves. These results should be quite encouraging for Episcopalians. Consider their answers to the following questions:

- **What did you like least about past church experiences?** The most common response was “Strict and Inflexible Beliefs” (21%)
- **What do you believe?** Very few (39%) said they believed the Bible to be totally inerrant.
- **What elements of church do you most prefer?** The unchurched preferred traditional hymns (47%) to contemporary praise music (30%); participatory liturgy (53%) to non-participatory (34%); children in church (56%) to separate children’s church (33%); choir and organ (53%) to praise bands (23%);

¹ Barna, George (2002). Grow Your Church from the Outside In: Understanding the Unchurched and How to Reach Them. Ventura, CA: Regal.

² Rainer, Thom S. (2004). The Unchurched Next Door. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

orderly service (55%) to charismatic service (31%); weekly communion (44%) to occasional communion (34%); sermons that address real life concerns (62%) to expository sermons (21%).

Conclusions

The reason the Evangelical churches are growing faster than mainline churches like the Episcopal Church now may not be because they have something that is inherently more appealing to a larger cross-section of people. Rather, it may be because they have found effective ways for dealing with a particular niche among the unchurched. From the data, it would appear that larger percentages of the unchurched would find many aspects of the Anglican/Episcopal ethos and approach very appealing. The problem is not that the Episcopal church has nothing to offer the unchurched but rather that Episcopalians may not have confidence that what they have to offer is of value. Perhaps what is needed is an authentically Anglican/Episcopal theology of evangelism.

COMPARING THE UNCHURCHED TO THE CHURCHED

Adapted from *Grow Your Church from the Outside In: Understanding the Unchurched and How to Reach Them.*

Issue	Unchurched	Churched
1. Demographics a. Sex b. Age c. Education d. Income e. Marital f. Race (otherwise NSD) g. Have Children	54% Male NSD > Minors > Under Poverty > Single > White 36%	46% Male NSD > Seniors > Above Poverty > Married > Black 32%
2. General Self Description a. Self-sufficient b. Open to New Experiences c. Career First d. Addiction	94% 81% 33% 10%	91% 76% 10% 10%
3. Spiritual Self Description a. Theologically Liberal b. Theologically Conservative c. Charismatic d. Evangelical Christian	46% 43% 21% 12%	32% 58% 21% 51%
4. Most Desirable for Their Future a. Good physical health b. A high degree of integrity c. One partner for life d. Close personal friendships e. Purpose for living f. Close relationship with God	85% 73% 70% 69% 64% 44%	93% 85% 85% 78% 80% 84%
5. Bible Reading Frequency a. Weekly b. Monthly c. Quarterly d. Once/twice a year e. Less than once a year f. Never	15% 10% 12% 18% 21% 25%	50% 14% 11% 7% 4% 8%

WHAT THE UNCHURCHED SAY ABOUT THEMSELVES

Adapted from Grow Your Church from the Outside In: Understanding the Unchurched and How to Reach Them.

Issue	Highest Response	Lowest Response
1. Liked Least About Past Church Experiences.	21% Hypocritical Behavior 21% Strict/Inflexible Beliefs 21% Nothing in Particular	6% Air of Superiority 4% Telling How to Live 4% Pressure to Join
2. Main Reason Not Attending	26% No Time 16% Not interested 14% Beliefs Diff from Church	5% Other 1% Church Irrelevant <1% Dislike Denominations
3. Beliefs	76% God helps those who help selves 71% God created the world 69% angels exist and interact w/us 69% doing good gets you to heaven 68% faith is important to me	39% the Bible is totally accurate 31% sin is outdated 25% you should talk about faith 23% acceptance of Christ necessary for salvation
4. Desired Entry Point for Church	40% worship service 19% special event 15% community outreach	6% small class at church 5% small group at home 4% adult Sunday school class
5. Prefer to Be Called	52% inquirer 48% explorer 40% seeker	20% non-Christian 13% prodigal 11% lost 10% nonbeliever
6. Prefer to Be Treated at Church	78% thank-you note from pastor 76% not singled out 72% given information about church 72% greeted by member after service 64% fellowship hour	39% asked to identify self 35% asked to wear visitor name tag 34% visit from pastor 34% visit from member

Issue	Highest Response	Lowest Response
7. Preferred Elements of Church (Paired)	47% traditional hymns 48% informal service 55% < 100 ASA 77% < 200 ASA 53% participatory service 56% children in church 53% choir & organ 55% orderly service 44% communion weekly 54% small group/healing prayer 62% sermons address real concerns	30% contemporary worship music 36% formal service 22% > 300 ASA 7% > 1,000 ASA 34% non-participatory service 33% separate children's service 23% praise bands 31% charismatic service 34% communion occasionally 37% no interaction in service 21% sermons are expository
8. Decision Factors in Choosing a Church	66% how people love each other 65% sermon quality 61% belief/doctrine 60% how much church helps the poor	32% distance from home 26% personal commitment required 25% how committed to faith sharing 24% political/social involvement
9. Impact of Communication Methods	63% invited by friend 50% invited by pastor 48% heard good things about church	16% TV advertizement 11% church name is appealing 9% ad in newspaper/yellow pages

12 MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE UNCHURCHED

Adapted from *Grow Your Church from the Outside In: Understanding the Unchurched and How to Reach Them*.

Misconception	Facts
1. Successful ministry to the unchurched means following the right model.	There is no right model. What seems to be necessary is that the church have a servant-minded culture and views evangelism as a lifestyle rather than an activity.
2. Dealing with the attitudes of the unchurched toward the Church and Christianity is a big problem	Actually, the people more likely to have an attitude problem are the churched. Unchurched individuals are more open-minded and malleable than we think.
3. You must have a "Seeker Service."	Few of the churches most effective with the unchurched have seeker services. Most are careful to avoid church jargon, formal dress, and too many traditional symbols. The unchurched want to see how the people of God worship God and love each other. Must be seeker sensitive rather than seeker driven.
4. The best way to attract the unchurched is through large-scale events.	If not careful, large-scale events can diminish the congregations feeling of responsibility for evangelism. If use properly, they can promote name recognition.
5. The route to success is to copy Willow Creek or Saddleback.	Most who try to copy Willow Creek/Saddleback are not nearly so successful. In fact, you shouldn't copy approach in its entirety but learn why it is effective in its setting, and ask what elements may apply.
6. If you do it right, most of the people in your church will have been unchurched before they choose your church as their home church.	In churches effective in attracting the unchurched the average number attending who were previously unchurched is 40-50%.
7. If you do a good job, most of your unchurched visitors will return.	Of unchurched visitors, on average about half attend once or twice and disappear.
8. Ministry to the unchurched requires a large staff.	A large staff is not usually necessary, though more than one clergy can be useful.

Misconception	Facts
<p>9. The unchurched require anonymity. When they are ready to get involved, they will tell you.</p>	<p>Unchurched visitors don't want to be singled out or treated differently, but that doesn't mean they are averse to being involved. Filling out a visitor form is a good sign that they may respond well to opportunities for involvement. Church should have an intentional process designed to inform, encourage, and motivate the visitor to move forward in the spiritual quest.</p>
<p>10. If an unchurched person comes five or six times, he or she will stay for good.</p>	<p>Attending is not the key, but involvement. Once a person finds a connection to a program to attend, a means of serving, or to new friends, then he or she is likely to stay.</p>
<p>11. Success in reaching the unchurched depends upon the pastor's personality and preaching.</p>	<p>Success in reaching the unchurch depends upon creating a network of relationships and emotional attachments. "I could preach heresy for weeks and they wouldn't notice . . . but they did notice . . . how people treated each other, how comfortable they felt, and what their kids said about their experience."</p>
<p>12. Once you start attracting the unchurched, the challenge is simply managing the flow of incoming people.</p>	<p>Long-term success comes from intentionally maturing the faith and commitment of the people who come.</p>

BEST PRACTICES IN REACHING THE UNCHURCHED

Adapted from Grow Your Church from the Outside In: Understanding the Unchurched and How to Reach Them.

Philosophy of Ministry

- **Be Relevant.** "De-Weird" the church. Allow questioning. Be willing to adapt to culture without adopting it.
- **Steal, Adapt, and Adopt.** Steal creatively practices that work, but adapt them to your specific setting before adopting.
- **Enthusiasm for Greeting.** Newcomers need to be welcomed by at least five people before they feel truly welcome.
- **Importance of the Heart.** It's all about the people and how they love God and each other. Love People into the Kingdom of God.

Preparation

- **Training for Every Person.** Being newcomer-friendly is everyone's job.
- **From Outsider to Insider.** Provide many different clear paths for outsiders to become insiders.
- **The Whole Picture.** Examine your entire church and all processes for newcomer-friendliness.

Process

- **The Makeup of the Worship Service.** Friendly to unchurched but also allows the church to worship authentically (and the unchurched to get a taste of what that worship is like).
- **Identifying the Visitors.** Develop an intentional process for incorporating newcomers.
- **Getting the Visitor Involved.** Achieve an appropriate balance between allowing newcomers to become involved at their own pace and missing a window of opportunity to invite involvement.
- **The Problem of Success.** Don't let growth outstrip your ability to minister.

Products (measures of success)

- **Baptisms**
- **Increasing numbers in small groups**
- **More people involved in serving others**
- **Increasing percentage not joining by transfer**
- **Increased personal faith commitment**
- **Consistent attendance at worship**
- **Completion of a newcomers class**

TEN SURPRISES ABOUT THE UNCHURCHED
Adapted from The Unchurched Next Door, by Thom S. Rainer

1. Most of the unchurched prefer to attend church on Sunday morning if they attend.
2. Most of the unchurched feel guilty about not attending church.
3. Ninety-six percent of the unchurched are at least somewhat likely to attend church if they are invited (more than nine out of 10).
4. Very few of the unchurched had someone share with them how to become a Christian.
5. Most of the unchurched have a positive view of pastors, ministers and the church.
6. Many of the unchurched have a church background.
7. Some types of "cold calls" are effective; many are not.
8. The unchurched would like to develop a real and sincere relationship with a Christian.
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.
10. Many of the unchurched are far more concerned about the spiritual well-being of their children than themselves.