

# Shattering Myths about the Unchurched

Thom S. Rainer

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## Introduction

As the unofficial new millennium dawned in January of 2000, a group of men and women from The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary began an exciting research project on the unchurched in America. Over 350 interviews took place with new adult Christians and church members. Most of these men and women had been Christians for less than a year. The research team then interviewed about the same number of longer-term Christians, the control or comparison group for this project.

These 700 interviews took hundreds of hours to conduct. Why were we interested in the views of these new Christians and new church members? Why did we spend over a year researching this group that we called “the formerly unchurched?” Frankly, we desired to hear a new perspective on unchurched people. Most, if not all, previous studies have been conducted on the unchurched. These studies seek to learn from non-Christians what the church needs to do to reach them. Strategies are then developed around these perceived needs.

Our study, however, asked different questions of a different group of people. Instead of asking the unchurched how the church can reach them, we asked these “formerly unchurched” what instruments God used to bring them to Christ and into the church. And the answers we received were significantly different from the

responses noted in other research projects on the unchurched.

Perhaps one wonders why we need research on the unchurched. The answer is simple: because we need to reach these people with the gospel and message of Jesus Christ. Yet in my role as a church consultant, I find a lot of confusion about the lost and unchurched population because many Christians do not realize how unevangelized and unchurched America has become.

## Our Changing Country

Only forty-one percent of Americans attend church services on a typical weekend.<sup>1</sup> Each new generation becomes

Generation	Birth Years	Percentage Attending Church
Builders	Before 1946	51%
Boomers	1946 to 1964	41%
Busters	1965 to 1976	34%
Bridgers	1977 to 1994	29%

increasingly unchurched. Slightly over one-half (51%) of the builder generation (born before 1946) attends church on a typical weekend. But only forty-one percent of the boomers (born 1946 to 1964) and thirty-four percent of the busters (born 1965 to 1976) attend church on a given weekend.<sup>2</sup>

Our recent research on the younger generation, the bridgers (born 1977 to 1994), indicates that only four percent of

the teenagers understand the gospel and have accepted Christ, even if they attend church.<sup>3</sup> Of the entire bridger generation, less than thirty percent attend church. America is clearly becoming less Christian, less evangelized, and less churched. Yet too many of those in our churches seem oblivious to this reality. The primary concern for some is the status quo for comfort's sake.

The growing ranks of the unchurched are not problems limited to certain geographical areas. There are areas like Yolo County, California that has only twenty-eight percent of its residents claimed by any church. New Age, alternative religions, and the presence of the University of California-Davis partially explain this phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

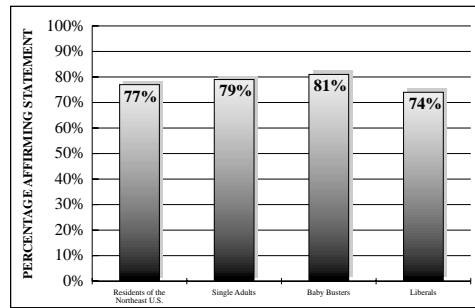
While we shake our heads knowingly that Yolo County is seventy-two percent unchurched, do we realize that areas like Menifee County, Kentucky (population 5,200) are eighty-seven percent unchurched?<sup>5</sup>

Yet religion and religious values remain vital to people. Over eighty percent of American adults said that "religious faith is very important in [their lives]."<sup>6</sup> Even those groups that are often perceived to be less overtly religious, affirmed the preceding statement, including residents of the Northeast (77%), single adults (79%), baby busters (81%) and liberals (74%) (see exhibit 1).<sup>7</sup>

Yet with religion being so important in the lives of the vast majority of Americans, church attendance and church affiliation have shown no improvement. The percentage of adults attending church on a given weekend in 1999 was the same level as it was in 1986.<sup>8</sup>

Despite a plethora of resources on reaching those who do not attend church, the

Exhibit 1  
"Religious faith is very important in my life"  
affirmed by selected groups.



population of the unchurched in America continues to increase. One Christian researcher notes, "At the same time that in America a multitude of new churches are being launched, and the mass media continue to report on the impact of mega-churches, the number of unchurched adults is also on the rise."<sup>9</sup>

Our research team has come to similar conclusions. Less than four percent of churches in America meet our criteria to be an effective evangelistic church.<sup>10</sup> Only one person is reached for Christ each year for every eighty-five church members in America.<sup>11</sup>

### Paradigm Shifts in Methodologies but Not Principles

When my oldest son, Sam, was four years old, he started running a high fever. At first my wife and I were not too concerned, since young children often have fevers with viruses and infections. We calmly rationalized that his doctor could remedy the situation quickly.

The physician came to no conclusive diagnosis and the fever did not break. We soon found ourselves in an emergency room with Sam as numerous attendants tried again and again to get his fever to break. At one point, the worried doctor looked at us and said, "Pray that we can find the problem. All we are doing now is

treating the symptoms.” Sam is now a healthy young man completing college. To this day I still remember asking people to pray for his healing, and to pray that the doctors would diagnose the problem.

Only a small percentage of churches in America have recognized the problems of a growing lost and unchurched population in America. They have made intentional and successful efforts to reach the unchurched. They have been the “success stories” of evangelism that our research team has reported over the past decade.<sup>12</sup> Yet many churches are addressing the symptoms only. A certain worship style, the latest small group, a new church vernacular, or the “right” church name are seen to be a panacea to the problem of not reaching the unchurched. Please understand my comments. Many times these “symptoms” need serious work. Yet the real “treatment” must be at a deeper and more profound level.

As I have reported different phases of our research across the nation, some people will tell me of churches that are growing with methods different from what our research indicates. Certainly we have found a few exceptions. Yet most of these growing churches, we found upon further research, were not reaching the unchurched population. Most of their growth came from the transfer of active Christian church members from other churches.

### **New Light from the Formerly Unchurched on the Real State of Unchurched People**

Our motivation in researching the “formerly unchurched” was to discover the “problem” that needed addressing, rather than simply treating the “symptoms.” We learn much from the over 350 men and

women who gave us their time and shared their hearts. We called these respondents the formerly unchurched because they are new to the church and new to faith in Christ. Indeed it was the formerly unchurched themselves who shattered some myths about reaching the unchurched population. In this article I share nine of those myths.

### ***Myth #1: Most Unchurched Think and Act like Anglo, Middle-Class Suburbanites with No Church Background***

I anticipate that most people who read this article will acknowledge that the unchurched come from a variety of backgrounds. Yet most church strategies for intentionally reaching the unchurched in a particular community seem to be cookie-cutter approaches. These approaches were effective in their original settings, but do not readily replicate their success in communities that may be quite different in their ethnic or cultural background.

William B. is an African-American man twenty-three years old, who has little church background. His grandmother, when asked by William what she wanted for her birthday, said simply, “I want you to go to church with me next Sunday.” William reluctantly agreed because he felt trapped.

William was pleasantly surprised. He found the Memphis-area Baptist church to be alive with hearty singing of black gospel music. The pastor was a great communicator who seemed to know how to speak to the African-American male. He pulled no punches on issues of sin, responsibility, and commitment.

No one had to invite William back to church, although several did. He became involved in different ministries and pro-

grams. He asked his grandmother questions about God, Christ, and the gospel. She patiently explained to him how he could become a Christian.

“I just didn’t know what I was missing,” said William. “I can’t understand why Christians aren’t beating down doors to share the gospel. Why didn’t someone tell me about Jesus before I turned twenty-three?”

William B. is not the stereotypical unchurched person often conveyed in books and conferences. He prefers black gospel music. He is challenged by direct and confrontational preaching. Sermons an hour in length do not bother him. Indeed many of the unchurched “rules” were broken by the Memphis church when William visited the first time. But he loved every minute of it, and he returned.

One of my favorite books on the unchurched is *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* by Lee Strobel.<sup>13</sup> As a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* with a law degree, he was one of the newspaper’s authorities on legal issues. Strobel was also an atheist. But, through the ministry of Willow Creek Community Church in a suburb of Chicago, Strobel met Christ. He eventually became a teaching pastor at Willow Creek where he stayed for many years before accepting a similar position at Saddleback Valley Community Church in Southern California.

The book is a fascinating account of Strobel’s conversion and how Willow Creek did so many things well to reach him. His primary thesis is that the church must understand the context in which unchurched people live.

Unfortunately, numerous church leaders have decided that it is the method-

ological model of Willow Creek that reached Strobel rather than a philosophical commitment to reach the unchurched in their context. The methods used to reach Lee Strobel would probably have proved highly ineffective with Joe M. in Kentucky and William B. in Memphis. But they may have been effective with Donna C. in Detroit.

Our study has reminded us unequivocally that the unchurched are not a monolithic group. The next myth is but one example of this reality.

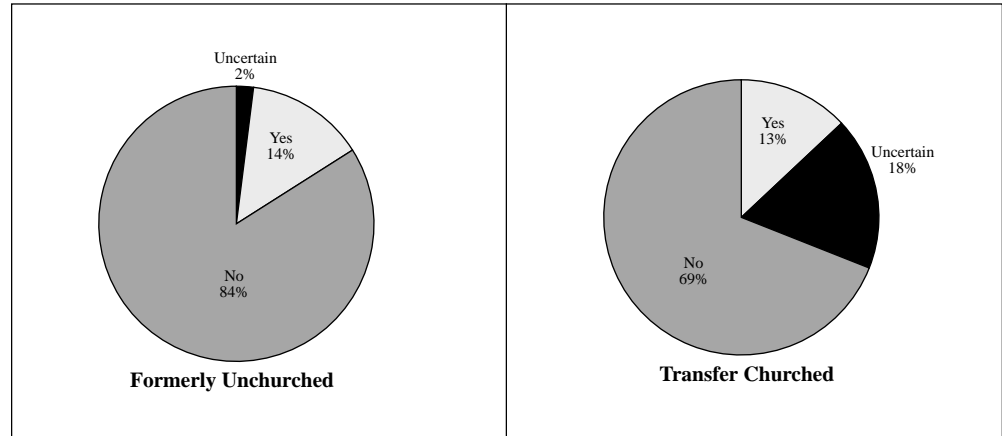
### ***Myth # 2: The Unchurched Are Turned Off by Denominational Names in the Church Name***

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises in our study was that the name of the church had very little influence on reaching the unchurched. For those who insist that the denominational name be reflected in the church name, the formerly unchurched said that it did not affect their decision to join the church. For those who insist that the denominational name be left out of the church name, the formerly unchurched said the neutral name was not a factor in their decision to join the church.

Indeed when we ask straightforwardly, “Did the name of the church influence your decision to join?” we often heard pauses, as if the interviewee was unclear about the question. The pause would often be followed with comments like, “I don’t understand” or “What do you mean?” After we explained the questions again, the respondent would express surprise at the nature of the inquiry.

Mark R. is a thirty-nine-year-old formerly unchurched person from upstate New York. His response is representative: “The name of the church never really entered my mind.” He added, “I didn’t

Exhibit 2  
Did the name of the church influence your decision to join?



have a clue what a Wesleyan church was, but that’s not what got me interested in the church.” His primary influence in coming to the church was his sister and her husband. “After all,” Mark reflected, “I really don’t choose a store because of its name. What does ‘Wal-Mart’ mean anyway?”

Over eighty percent of the formerly unchurched told us that the church name had little or no influence upon their joining a particular church. Seven of ten who were church transfers said the same (see Exhibit 2).

A further element of surprise came when we asked follow-up questions of the formerly unchurched who said the church name *did* affect their decision-making process. Nearly two-thirds of those respondents indicated that the denominational name was a *positive* influence on their decision.

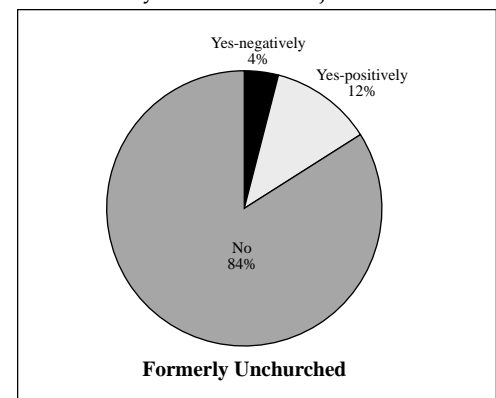
Jane L., from the Little Rock, Arkansas area, told us that “seeing Baptist in the name gave me some assurance that the church was not some wacko cult.” Though Jane had rarely attended church in her forty-three years of life, she had several friends who were Baptists. Because they were “normal” people, she thought the church would be okay.

After we factor in the reasons for “yes” responses to our question, the results are perhaps even more amazing. Only four out of 100 formerly unchurched indicated that a denominational name had a negative influence upon them as they sought a church home. The vast majority, eighty-four percent, hardly considered the church name in their deliberations. And one out of eight formerly unchurched told us that a denominational name actually influenced them positively.

I can anticipate some reactions to our findings. What about the numerous surveys typically conducted by local churches that indicate certain denominational names were perceived negatively in the eyes of the unchurched?

My first response to the anticipated

Exhibit 3  
Did the name of the church influence your decision to join?



question, the one of which I am most confident, is “I don’t know.” My second response is that our research and questions were asked of the formerly unchurched, not the unchurched. The thesis of this article is that the formerly unchurched provide us insights that we have not previously heard.

A third response is that the formerly unchurched, once some person or event triggers within them a desire to go to church, focus on matters other than the church name. Evelyn F., for example, said that the name “Evangelical Free Church” might have engendered a negative response earlier in her life. But once certain crises in her life prompted her to seek a church home, “I could have cared less what the name of the church was. I was lonely and hurting and needed to find a community that cared.”

**Myth #3: The Unchurched Never Attend Church**

The word “unchurched” naturally implies that a person has no interest in a church, and never attends a church. Our survey of the formerly unchurched indicates, however, that there are relatively few Americans who *never* attend church.

Our information seems to have the support of other studies. George Barna’s 1999 study of the unchurched found that thirty-one percent of the American adult population is unchurched. For his survey a person was classified as unchurched “if he or she had not attended a Christian church service during the past six months, other than a special event such as a wedding or funeral or holiday service.”<sup>14</sup>

Such a narrow definition was necessary because most adults attend some type of church service in the course of a year. If we defined an unchurched person as one

who never attends any kind of church service in a year, including holiday services, the population of the unchurched in America would be small.

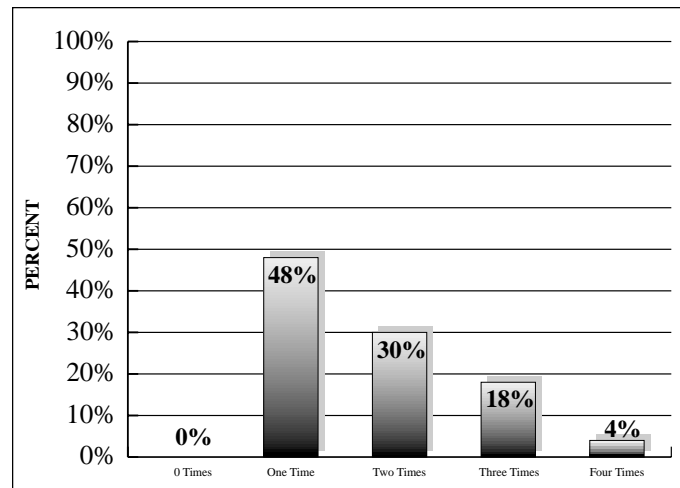
Because some church leaders have a perspective that views the unchurched as people completely foreign to the church, the leaders may assume the unchurched are totally ignorant about biblical or church matters. Our study of the formerly unchurched, however, found that the church was neither strange nor frightening to them when they visited.

“I had attended some Easter services and a few ‘regular’ services over the past four or five years,” Paul Y. of California, told us. “I might not have been as familiar with the church as the regular members were, but I wasn’t totally ignorant either.”

When we asked a portion of the formerly unchurched in our study how often they visited a church a year prior to joining a church, *none* said zero times. Some of the formerly unchurched attended as much as once a quarter even though they had no church affiliation in the past.

Church leaders should realize that the

Exhibit 4  
How many times in a year did you visit a church (for any service) when you had no church affiliation?



unchurched are not as unfamiliar with the church as we sometimes believe. Indeed, many of our formerly unchurched respondents found some efforts to make the church seeker friendly a bit amusing. Pam W. of Oregon noted that, although she had not attended church ever with any regularity, she certainly understood the basic concept of sin, a word that one preacher she heard awkwardly avoided.

The unchurched, for the most part, do have some familiarity with the church. On Easter Sunday in 1999, twelve percent of atheists and agnostics attended a Christian church service. That figure translates to nearly a million adults.<sup>15</sup> If one out of eight atheists and agnostics attend at least one service a year, we can presume that the vast majority of the unchurched, who hold to some theistic belief, will show up at least once a year. Will the church be ready for them?

***Myth #4: The Unchurched Can Not Be Reached by Direct Personal Evangelism***

Mark W. lives in a medium-sized town about sixty miles from St. Louis. He was one of the several million unchurched who attended church the past Easter Sunday. "I typically attended church on Easter," Mark told us. "There was no particular reason for my once-a-year church habit. No major crisis, no guilt trip. It was just something I did."

Mark gladly filled out the guest cards as requested in the service. He did not mind hearing from the pastor by letter and receiving information on the church. In 1999, however, he received a telephone call from the church, requesting the opportunity to visit him. Mark agreed to receive the two men from the church. "The two guys got right to the point," Mark

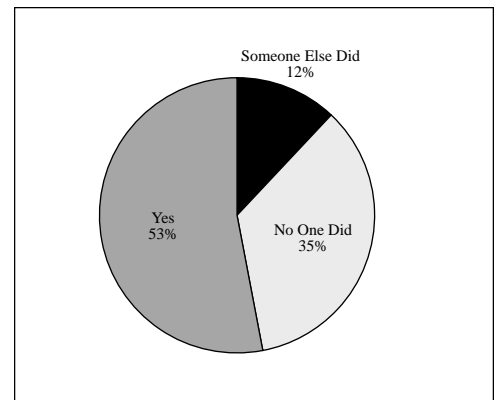
commented. "They explained to me how I could become a Christian. I received Christ and have been in church ever since."

The seeker-sensitive movement has been a needed wake up call for dead, inwardly-focused churches. The movement has rightly reminded churches to be aware of or sensitive to the presence of lost persons in a worship service. Some churches, however, experience a decline in the personal evangelistic efforts when the church focus is on seeker sensitivity. An attitude can develop that sees the seeker-sensitive worship service as *the only* evangelistic methodology, and as a result, individual evangelistic efforts may decline.

The formerly unchurched in our study left little doubt about the importance of personal evangelism in reaching the unchurched. Over one-half indicated that someone from the church they joined shared Christ with them. Another twelve percent told us that someone other than a member at the church they joined personally evangelized them. Only one-third of the formerly unchurched said that no one made an attempt to share Christ one-on-one. (See exhibit 5)

The majority of the formerly un-

Exhibit 5  
Did someone from the church you joined share with you how to become a Christian?



churched who were personally evangelized also told us that someone made an effort to see them within a month of their visit to the church. While the building of relationships with the unchurched is critical, we heard repeatedly that an evangelistic visit, even by a stranger from the church, had an eternal impact.

***Myth #5: The Pastor Must Be a Dynamic and Charismatic Leader for the Church to Reach the Unchurched***

Recently I spoke to a large audience in the Detroit area. John Maxwell preceded me and Josh McDowell followed me. In my imagination I could hear some of the audience saying, “I know John Maxwell and I know Josh McDowell. But who is this Rainer guy?” I guess I could have been intimidated to be sandwiched between two of the greatest communicators in America, but I decided to be myself. I had a great time!

Do you ever go to a conference or hear an audio of a great communicator or a charismatic leader, and leave with a sense of frustration? Pastors often say, “I’m just not the leader that Rick Warren is.” And laypersons often compare, unfairly, their pastors with many of these dynamic leaders.

Our research team interviewed the formerly unchurched about their pastors. For example, Joe M. of eastern Kentucky, mentioned earlier in this article, said of his pastor, “He’s a great guy but I’ve heard a lot of better preachers. And sometimes he doesn’t seem to have the best organizational skills. But our church keeps growing and reaching lost people.”

Indeed the pastors themselves often commented that they have to work hard when other leaders, perceived to be more dynamic, seem to have a natural ability

to train people. Micah L. a Nazarene pastor from Idaho told us, “I have come to the conclusion that I can’t be Bill Hybels or John Maxwell. I can however be faithful with the gifts God has given me. And God is blessing our church.”

***Myth #6: We Must Be Careful in Our Teaching and Preaching Not to Communicate Complex Biblical Truths That Will Confuse the Unchurched***

“You know what frustrated me the most when I started visiting churches?” Susan M. asked us. Susan was a life-long unchurched person living in the Chicago area. 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.” But Susan was sorely disappointed with what she heard. “It was more of a pop-psychology message. The biblical view was never explained. Bible texts were hardly mentioned,” she lamented.

One important lesson that we learned from the formerly unchurched is that we should never dilute biblical teachings for the sake of the unchurched. Jennifer K. is a Minnesota resident who expressed similar sentiments. “You know, I have watched CNBC [a business cable network] for years since I follow my investments closely,” she said. “I remember the first time I watched the program. They used a language that contained some strange

phrases, like stock splits, P/E ratio, and NASDAQ. Sometimes they explained them and other times I had to go to the dictionary or the Internet to learn, but I enjoyed the learning experience.” Jennifer continued, “Now that I am a Christian and an active church member, I have been telling the pastor and the church staff that meaty teaching and preaching attracts the unchurched. I think they’re listening.”

Similar comments to Jennifer’s were repeated by many of the formerly unchurched. When we asked if the doctrine or belief of the church they eventually joined was important, the responses were surprising and overwhelming. Ninety-one percent of the formerly unchurched indicated that the doctrine was an important factor that attracted them to the church. (Exhibit 6)

Perhaps equally surprising was the fact that the unchurched were slightly more concerned about doctrine than Christians who had transferred from another church. Almost all of the formerly unchurched responded that doctrine was important. Nine out of ten of the transfer church responded likewise.

The implications of these findings could be significant in our attempts to reach the unchurched. How would our

strategies change if we considered the teaching of doctrine to be a major issue in reaching the unchurched?

***Myth #7: The Sunday School and Other Small Groups Are Ineffective in Attracting the Unchurched***

Over the past decade or so, a worship revolution began to take place in many churches across America. The revolution is sorely needed. In thousands of churches, worship has become stale, ritualistic, and uninspiring.

This worship revolution includes the seeker-sensitive movement, a movement that reminds the church that what we say, sing, and do in worship is often confusing and irrelevant to the unchurched who may be visiting our churches. Again, many of the contributions of the seeker-sensitive movements were sorely needed.

Almost forgotten in these new emphases in worship was the two hundred-year-old program called Sunday school. I was among many church forecasters who thought that the Sunday school was a program that belonged in antiquity, a dinosaur headed for extinction.<sup>16</sup> To many, the thought of Sunday school evokes mental images of a dimly-lit room with old furniture, walls painted most recently

Exhibit 6  
Was doctrine (the beliefs of the church) an important factor in your choosing this church?

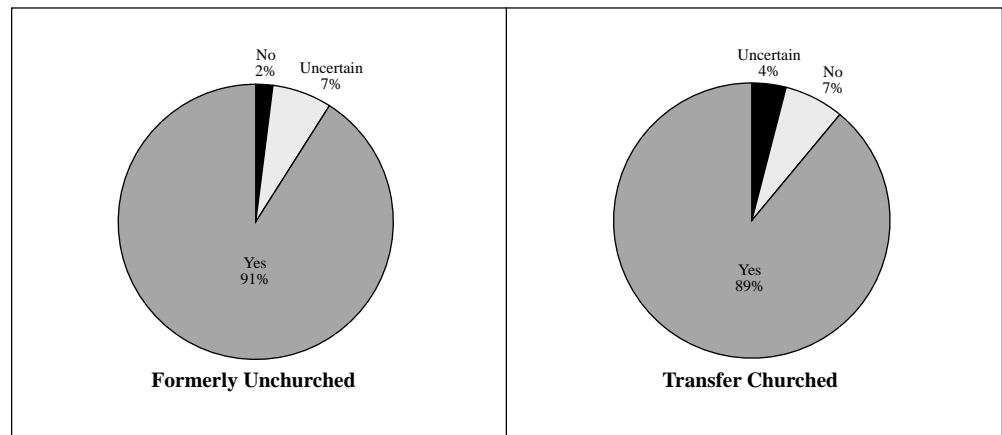
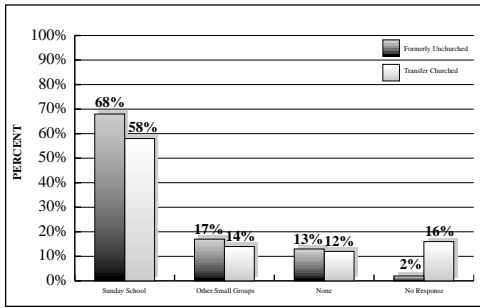


Exhibit 7  
In which small group, if any,  
are you active today?



in 1972, and an eighty-four-year-old teacher who sleeps through his or her own lessons.

Not only has our research shown the resurgence of Sunday school in the more effective churches in America, we learned through this study that the formerly unchurched are positive about and attracted to Sunday school. In fact, the formerly unchurched were more likely to be active in Sunday school than the transfer churched. In a majority of our interviews it was the formerly unchurched who indicated the greatest allegiance to Sunday school.

We were amazed to find that nearly seven out of ten formerly unchurched were active in Sunday school at the point of our interview. Approximately six out of ten transfer churched were involved in Sunday school (exhibit 7). Both categories of people were much more likely to be in Sunday school than any other small group.

Chris R., a formerly unchurched forty-two-year-old man from Oklahoma expressed the views of many whom we interviewed: "Look, I'm a new Christian. I've got so much to learn. What better place to learn and to fellowship with other Christians than a Sunday school class?"

Interestingly, we did notice a slight transition from the nomenclature "Sunday school." Almost twenty percent of the

churches in our study called their Sunday morning small group "Bible study." But this shift was done because of the churches' perception of how the name "Sunday school" is received. No formerly unchurched expressed concerns about the name.

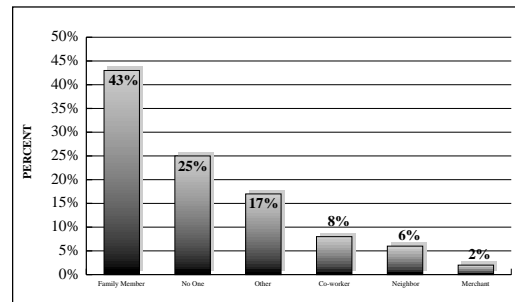
**Myth #8: The Most Important Evangelistic Relationships Take Place in the Marketplace**

The marketplace most often refers to the place where we meet people who are not part of our family: places of work, schools, neighborhoods, and places where we shop and do business. Many good studies and books advocate the training of laity for marketplace evangelism, or for the development of relationships with the unchurched in the marketplace.

While we would not diminish the importance of marketplace relationships for evangelism, our study of the formerly unchurched found that family member relationships were even more important. And of the different family members, wives were the ones most often mentioned as important in influencing the formerly unchurched to Christ and the church.

Exhibit 8 clearly depicts the importance of family members in leading persons to Christ and to the church. Art R., a Florida

Exhibit 8  
Which person was the greatest influence  
in your coming to church?  
(Note: "Friends" were included in the  
co-worker, neighbor and other categories.)



native, told us a common story: “The reason I’m in church today is because of my wife. When I saw the change in her life, I decided to try it out. Now I’m Christian, and hardly ever miss church.”

Art not only told us that family members were the greatest influence in his coming to church, he told us specifically that his wife was the key person God used in the process. We can not overstate the importance of wives in bringing these formerly unchurched persons to Christ and to the church.

Exhibit 9 depicts a breakdown of the forty-three percent representing family members who influenced the formerly unchurched in their spiritual pilgrimage. Over one-third of this group indicated that their wives were the key influence, more than five times the number of the second highest influence, children of the formerly unchurched.

Husbands of the formerly unchurched had a minimal influence. They ranked below wives, children, and parents in leading their loved ones to come to church.

Again we ask the question: Do most churches today have an intentional strategy to develop these relationships so that the unchurched may come to Christ and the church? Specifically, in those situations where wives are churched and their hus-

bands are not, does the church provide resources and training for these women to reach their husbands for the Kingdom? Perhaps the surprising aspect of this portion of the study is that the most receptive unchurched group is living in the homes of those already active in our churches.

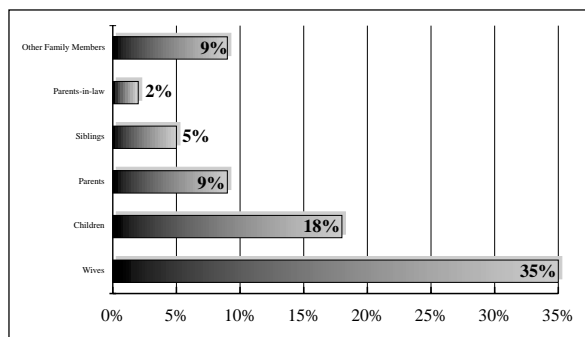
***Myth # 9: The Unchurched Are Concerned Only about Their Own Needs***

The reasons the unchurched become churched are complex. In the course of our research, we found no simple explanations to the process. While there is much to commend strategies that focus on meeting the felt needs of the unchurched, an exclusive needs-meeting strategy neglects two major issues.

First, the unchurched often desire to be challenged. As Bobby J. of Pennsylvania told us, “I didn’t want to be a part of a church that put everything on a silver platter. Even before I became a Christian, I sensed that I needed to be a part of something where I could help others.” Our study found that churches that expect much receive much, even from many of the unchurched. Perhaps an important lesson that we learned from the formerly unchurched is that churches should try to appeal to the unchurched person’s altruistic motives. Bobby T. expressed it well: “I can tell you before I became a Christian, I knew I wanted to be in a place where I could make a difference. The church needs to hear the message not to dumb down the church or water down expectations.”

Another major insight gleaned from the formerly unchurched is that the unchurched do not always seek a place of worship for their own needs. Almost one

Exhibit 9  
Which person was the greatest influence in your coming to church?



out of three of the formerly unchurched informed us that they came or returned to the church for their children. Two major studies in the late 1990s affirmed that the most receptive years to the gospel are before people turn twenty years old.<sup>17</sup> Many of the unchurched seem to know intuitively that “religious training” is necessary for their children, even though they can not articulate specific reasons why. Bobby T. explained: “I’m a single dad with almost year-round custody of two kids, ages nine and eleven. One of the reasons I wanted to find a church was for Robby and Kayla. Though I had never been a member of a church, I just knew that it would be good for them, that it would help me to raise better kids.”

While the gospel of Christ clearly calls for believers to help meet the needs of others, the formerly unchurched told us that a church should not communicate an exclusively needs-based message. The unchurched do indeed have motives for seeking churches beyond their own personal felt needs.

### **New Insights/New Strategy**

More has been written on the unchurched in America the past fifteen years than any similar period in history. Yet with all the research and publications, the percentage of unchurched in our nation continues to increase.

Is it possible we have been asking the wrong people the wrong questions? Are we involved in exercises in futility by researching a large group, most of whom will never attend church? Should we be talking to those who *were* unchurched but who now attend? It is this group, the formerly unchurched, from whom we have much to learn.

Perhaps in the process we can learn

more about reaching people who do not know Christ. And perhaps we can seek from God new strategies or revive old approaches that may still work. Above all, perhaps in our quest to reach the non-Christian and unchurched world, we will see our churches and ourselves becoming more obedient to Christ’s Great Commission to reach all peoples (nations) with the gospel of the Savior Whom we serve.

### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> “Church Attendance,” *Barna Research*, online: <http://www.barna.org>, October 15, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See Thom S. Rainer, *The Bridger Generation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Brad Edmonton, “Unclaimed by God,” *American Demographics*, online: <http://www.demographics.com>, August 1995.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> “How Americans View Themselves,” *Barna Research*, online: <http://www.barna.org>, July 13, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> “Church Attendance.”

<sup>9</sup> “One Out of Three Adults Is Now Unchurched,” *Barna Research Group*, online: <http://www.barna.org>, February 25, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Our criteria to be classified as an effective evangelistic church are twofold. First, the church must have a minimum of 26 baptisms or conversions in a year. Second, the baptismal or conversion ratio cannot exceed 20:1. The ratio is calculated by taking the higher of membership or average worship attendance and dividing that number by the number of baptisms or conversion in a year. Two previous studies using these criteria are noted in the following books:

Thom S. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996); Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999).

<sup>11</sup>Based on data and research by the Rainer Group, a church consultation firm, 1996 to 2001.

<sup>12</sup>See particularly Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*.

<sup>13</sup>Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

<sup>14</sup>“One Out of Three Adults Is Now Unchurched.”

<sup>15</sup>“Church Attendance.”

<sup>16</sup>See my book *High Expectations*, for the story of my paradigm shift in my attitude about Sunday school. See also Ken Hemphill, *Revitalizing the Sunday Morning Dinosaur* (Nashville: Broadman, 1997), for an excellent overview of the resurgence of Sunday school.

<sup>17</sup>See Rainer, *The Bridger Generation* and George Barna, “Teens and Adults Have Little Chance of Accepting Christ as Their Savior.” *The Barna Report*, October-December, 1999.