

REACHING THE UNCHURCHED

It is my desire that the number of churches that are healthy, growing and reaching the unchurched continues to rise. Out of our study of the formerly unchurched came fifteen characteristics (ten listed here) that were common among all of the churches that were reaching the unchurched. Let these characteristics be used as a tool to evaluate your church, and use them to encourage and give fresh ideas to your ministry.

1. Major on majors

The experience of listening to the formerly unchurched and of studying churches that reach the unchurched was a joy, because these churches tend to major on majors. Other issues, like music style and sermon length, are treated, as they should be, as minor. Churches that reach the unchurched keep their priorities in order and their goals in clear view.

2. Be biblical, conservative and convictional

It must be said without hesitation that churches that reach the unchurched are theologically conservative. They have a high view of Scripture. And their convictions about their beliefs are obvious. A church can attempt many good contextual efforts to reach the unchurched, but if it does not have the foundations of a high view of Scripture, the efforts are either futile or transient.

3. Give evangelism priority and passion

I have visited many vibrant churches. Though they all agree on the key doctrines of the Christian faith, they do have theological differences. Their worship styles range from traditional to blended to contemporary. Their common bonds, however, include a conviction of the authority of God's Word and a passion for evangelism.

4. Develop an effective and comprehensive small- group ministry

The formerly unchurched told us they were attracted to small groups for two reasons: they desired further biblical teaching and training, and they sought to develop relationships with other Christians. Small groups dramatically impact the effectiveness of a church's outreach and assimilation.

5. Cultivate a user- friendly greeter ministry

The formerly unchurched appreciated the presence of greeters. They need to be trained and clearly identifiable. Provide a welcome center with good and updated information on the church. Make certain the greeter ministry includes taking people to their ultimate destination in the church. Do not merely give them directions; give them an escort.

6. Keep the friendliness issue before the church

Every church I have ever visited or consulted thinks it is friendly. These false perceptions are based on how members treat each other in the church. They need to be reminded each week to be friendly, especially to outsiders. Nearly four out of five formerly unchurched told us that the friendliness of the church was a factor in their becoming Christians and joining a particular church.

7. Seek excellence

The formerly unchurched were completely turned off by poor music, unkempt facilities, poorly prepared sermons, and ill-equipped Sunday school teachers. The typical American unchurched person has come to expect excellence in the business world, in the marketplace and in the entertainment industry. Often we heard the formerly unchurched voice surprise that God's church would accept anything that did not approach excellence.

8. Provide an inquirers and new members class

The formerly unchurched, for the most part, gladly attended an inquirers' class prior to their becoming Christians. By the time they were courageous enough to visit a church, they were eager to learn more about the church.

9. Foster ministry involvement

The formerly unchurched told us in many ways and many times, "We don't want to sit on the sidelines." These new Christians are incredibly eager to get involved, and their enthusiasm is contagious. Unfortunately, some churches do a fair job of reaching the unchurched only to see them leave within a few months.

10. Never forget the power of prayer

I do not put prayer near the end of this article as a postscript or an addendum to more pressing matters. But I say now without hesitation or reservation that prayer is key to reaching the unchurched. I rarely heard from an effective church that did not have a strong emphasis on prayer.

Adapted from Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them. (Zondervan, 2001).

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