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**The Formerly Unchurched:
Bridges to the Unchurched in the 21st Century**

Thom S. Rainer

When I left the field of pastoral ministry I recognized that my life was changing in terms of my involvement in ministry. Unlike those whose primary ministry is the local church, I was no longer on the "front lines of spiritual warfare." I could no longer speak from experience. So instead of voicing what should be done, I began to ask pastors and staff persons, "What are you doing?" I began to operate as a spiritual reporter on those front lines of spiritual warfare.

I began this reporting activity within my own denomination by studying Southern Baptist churches. I followed these studies by examining churches outside my denomination. The result was research obtained from approximately 4000 churches (800 Southern Baptist churches, 3200 non-Southern Baptist churches). These churches have been divided into two categories. First, 2000 of these churches are called effective evangelistic churches. Second, the remaining 2000 churches did not qualify as effective evangelistic churches. I do not mean to imply that this latter group consisted of ineffective churches. Simply these churches did not meet the criteria for effective evangelistic church status.

Admittedly the separation of these churches was subjective in nature, but such separation helped us to identify the most effective evangelistic churches in America. These effective evangelistic churches had to meet two criteria for such classification. The first criterion was twenty-six conversions the previous church year. The second criterion was a conversion ratio of less than 20 to 1 (total membership divided by annual conversions).

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We defined conversion to mean when a person who is lost without Christ comes to know Christ through the ministry of that particular church, and such a person becomes an active disciple within that church. The key here is an emphasis on responsible church membership and fruit-bearing discipleship. We are not looking at twenty-six people who came to Christ in a crusade yet never to be seen again.

The second criterion was a 20 to 1 ratio of membership, or attendance, to converts. Whichever figure was higher, membership or attendance, was divided by the number of conversions. Churches whose ratios exceeded this criterion were not included. For example if a church has 400 members, and there were ten conversions the previous year, the conversion ratio was 40 to 1. Obviously the higher the number of conversions the more likely the church would meet this effective evangelistic criterion.

The point is that the conversion ratio attempts to answer the question, "How many people in our church does it take to reach one person for Christ in a year?" On the average in America it takes eighty-five church members a year to reach one person for Christ. The truth is that we have a lot of people on our membership rolls who do nothing at all when it comes to evangelism. The state of evangelistic health in America is not good.

The following study is based on the third of three major studies conducted in the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. The first study conducted focused on the front door of the church. My book *Effective Evangelistic Churches* contains the results of what effective evangelistic churches are doing to reach people for Christ. My book *High Expectations* contains the results of the second study, which focused on the back door of the church. We tried to answer the question, "How effective are these effective evangelistic churches at closing the back door?" The focus of this third major study was the formerly unchurched person.

What do I mean by the phrase, "formerly unchurched"? Formerly unchurched persons are those persons who have come to know Christ and have become active in the church within two years of this study. These people have not been in church most, if not all, of their lives.

Why did we decide to study the formerly unchurched? There have been many excellent studies on the unchurched. We

decided, however, that we were going to take a different angle on this research. Instead of just looking at the unchurched, we set out to examine those people who were formerly unchurched, but who are now active church members. For fifteen months we asked these people many questions, trying to figure out what it was that God used to bring them to Christ and to fruit bearing discipleship in a local church. Hundreds of hours have been spent asking questions to over 350 formerly unchurched people.

Representing fourteen different denominations, independent churches, community churches, and all but three states in the United States, these formerly unchurched people are spread out geographically in both urban and suburban America. Statistically these churches represent the various geographical and cultural groups in America.

When I first read about Donald McGavran in the early 1980s, the one area that impressed me greatly was his commitment to detailed research. McGavran believed that research was necessary, because it was important to find out what churches were doing, or not doing, in the field. According to McGavran research was a tool that God would honor and use to answer the question, "Why are some churches growing and some churches not growing?" The following study was conducted with this same spirit.

There are seven major issues that we discovered after speaking with the formerly unchurched. The names of individuals who were contacted came from the churches that were studied (the 2000 churches that qualified as effective evangelistic churches). At the conclusion of our survey we would say, "Please give us the names of five people who are not Christians and not churched, who have recently come into your church. Also please include their address, telephone number, and permission to call and interview them." These people became the source for this study.

Relationships

Relationships are important to the unchurched person. Donna D. was a twenty-seven year old lady at the time of the study. She is currently a member of an independent community church in suburban Detroit. Donna, who was a divorcee with two young children, came to know Christ as her Lord and Savior, and she became a member of the local community church. During our

interview with Donna D. we found that relationships were very important in terms of her coming to Christ.

What surprised us was the fact that only fifty-three percent of the formerly unchurched indicated that relationships with people connected with the church was the most important issue. We anticipated a number higher than fifty-three percent.

Two-thirds of the formerly unchurched indicated that the primary relationship that brought them to Christ, and that brought them to church, was a family member. Sixty-seven percent of the formerly unchurched pointed to a family member as the one person responsible for their salvation and church membership. We were very loose with our definition of family, meaning that family could be identified as a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, a child, an in-law, or someone with connections to that specific family.

Donna D. called her mother and said, "Mom, I'm at wits end, what can I do?" Donna's mother told her about an evangelistic church in the area. This church had a good single-again ministry. Donna D. shared with us that her mother was the one who influenced her to go to that particular church.

Again and again we heard from spouses, particularly when we spoke with men, about how important it was that their partner introduced them both to the church and to Christ. Our research affirmed the fact that relationships are important, but we found that family relationships were supremely important. Our strategy, therefore, might be to determine how to reach people for Christ through the family relationships of those people who are in our churches now. Our church members are related to people who are not members of the Kingdom of God, or a local church. We must be more strategic and intentional than we have been in reaching this unchurched, yet related group. The point is that relationships are important, but family relationships are critical. I will now turn to the most receptive group of unchurched people.

The Bridger Generation

The most receptive unreached group is the bridger generation. In the grand tradition of Gary McIntosh I have learned how to alliterate the different generations. In his book *Make Room for the Boom . . . or Bust* McIntosh identifies the builders, the boomers, and the busters. Included in this study is another generation

that I call the bridger generation.

The bridger generation, sometimes called the millennial generation, sometimes called generation Y, sometimes called the I generation, or the Internet generation, was born between 1977 and 1994. Obviously when we are speaking of receptivity to the gospel, we are referring to the older end of this generation.

My research team surveyed over 5000 individuals, from every geographic region in the United States. These telephone interviews consisted of two critical questions. We did not ask these individuals if they were Christians. Instead we used the diagnostic questions from Evangelism Explosion, or a similar personal evangelism presentation. We asked, "If you were to die today, do you know for certain that you would go to heaven?" If the person responded positively we would ask a follow-up question, "Let's say that you are standing before God in heaven and He said, 'Why should I let you into my heaven? What would you say?'" We discovered that many people were trusting in good works, tradition, history, family, and church membership to get them to heaven.

The results were surprising for the approximately 1400 people who responded from each generation. The builder generation, those persons born before 1946, was the generation that built this nation economically and morally through the 1960s. Nearly two-thirds, sixty-five percent, indicated that they had placed their faith in Christ alone for salvation. This number was suprisingly high. The boomers, born 1946 to 1964, belong to that self-centered, narcissistic generation to which the marketers have appealed successfully. Thirty-five percent of this generation indicated that Christ was their personal savior. The busters were born between 1965 and 1976. Only fifteen percent of the busters indicated that they trusted Christ for their salvation. The only bridgers to whom we asked the questions were seventeen years or older. A meager four percent of this group indicated that they had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The bridger generation, born between 1977 and 1994, may, from a salvific point of view, be called the "lost generation."

I am not suggesting that we abandon the evangelization of adults, but the findings of this study may help us to at least rethink our evangelistic strategy for young people. George Barna found that eighty-seven percent of Christians came to Christ before the age of twenty. In our study we found that eighty-three

percent of Christians came to Christ before the age of twenty. The cults and false religions are targeting those young people. These groups understand that when they reach persons of a young age there is a good statistical probability that these young people will be loyal to their cause. Maybe we need to realize that an intentional strategy of evangelizing the youth, and some of the older children, is a wise investment of our resources.

Not only did we interview 350 formerly unchurched, but we interviewed the pastors of the churches where these formerly unchurched persons attend. If these churches were multiple staff, then we interviewed the staff members of these churches. We asked the question, "What is your intentional evangelistic strategy, if any?" In seventy-one percent of the churches, it was reported that they were intentionally trying to reach the young people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. These churches found that the most receptive unchurched group was the bridger generation, those people born between 1977 and 1994.

Formerly Unchurched are in High Expectation Churches

What do we mean by high expectation churches? In my most recent book, *High Expectation Churches*, I explained that these churches have high expectations for those people who were going to identify themselves with that local body of Christ. In other words these prospective members were not merely going to be members on a roll, rather they were expected to become involved actively in the ministry of that church.

One of the more common manifestations of high expectation churches is what we called an entry point class. This class is an entry point for people before they become a member of that church. Some denominations expect this commitment of potential members automatically, while others think such a notion is heresy.

The point is that most of the formerly unchurched were in churches that expected something of their potential members, even prior to membership. Does this research reveal a cause and effect relationship? No, but certainly the study demonstrates a strong correlation. The fact that the formerly unchurched were in high expectation churches was one of the major surprises of this study.

We asked the formerly unchurched if they understood the doctrine of the church, in the broadest sense, before they joined

the church. Also we asked these people if doctrine was an important factor in coming to the church before they joined. Ninety-eight percent of the formerly unchurched answered in the affirmative. These people revealed that the churches' beliefs were important to them. Does this fact mean that these people came to the church because of doctrine? Not necessarily so, but the formerly unchurched did indicate that doctrine was important to them in their decision to commit to a local church.

Two groups were interviewed in this study, the formerly unchurched and the transfer churched. The latter group consisted of people who were already Christians, and had moved from one church to another. We compared the formerly unchurched to this transfer group, and found a significant difference between the two groups in relation to their perceptions about the importance of a church's doctrine. Whereas ninety-eight percent of the formerly unchurched indicated that doctrine was important, only seventy-one percent of the transfer group indicated that doctrine was important. The point is that ninety-eight percent of the formerly unchurched came to a church identifying with the church's doctrine and believing it was important. These people came into churches that were considered high expectation churches.

Personal Evangelism

Personal evangelism is the key to reaching the unchurched. This statement sounds self-evident, but I am amazed at how few churches are encouraging their members to practice personal evangelism. Remember that fifty-three percent of the formerly unchurched indicated that the relationship with someone in the church was important. Seventy-two percent of these people said that someone from the church they eventually joined shared Christ with them personally.

In many churches personal evangelism has become unimportant. Many times we who identify ourselves with church growth receive the criticism that all we are concerned about is numbers and numerical growth. Clearly people need to hear that our heart's desire is to see people who are not part of the Kingdom of God introduced to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and come to a personal relationship with him. Personal evangelism is the key to reaching the unchurched.

Leadership

Leadership is still a critical issue for churches. Specifically I refer to the role of the senior pastor, or the solo pastor in a one staff church. We have spent hundreds and hundreds of hours interviewing these formerly unchurched people across denominational lines, geographical lines, and cultural lines trying to find out what the unchurched are saying, and what the churches are doing who are reaching the unchurched.

There are also many characteristics concerning the leadership of these churches. Five leadership issues surfaced from the formerly unchurched. First, the pastors of the churches who were reaching the unchurched were leaders who had a high view of Scripture. Second, these pastors were considered “down-to-earth people”. Third, these pastors tended to have a sense of humor. Fourth, these leaders were involved in personal evangelism each week. Fifth, fifty percent of these leaders held themselves accountable to someone for personal evangelism each week.

The point is that not only were the vast majority of these leaders involved in personal evangelism each week, half of them held themselves accountable to someone. Thus these leaders not only practiced personal evangelism on a weekly basis, but they modeled it as well.

Preaching and Reaching the Unchurched

The research revealed a clear correlation between preaching and reaching the unchurched. It was fascinating to ask the pastors in the effective evangelistic churches what excited them the most, and the least, about ministry. The second most exciting ministry for these pastors was personal evangelism. Interestingly, many of these leaders dreaded personal evangelism until they started doing it. But by far the most exciting ministry for these pastors was preaching. Ninety percent of these leaders indicated that the most exciting thing that they do each week is the task of preaching. Only forty-two percent of the control group (the other 2000 pastors) indicated that preaching excited them the most. Again there is a clear correlation between preaching and reaching the unchurched.

Maybe we should look to Acts 6, and read again the story of the Hellenistic Jews and the native Hebrews. The widows of

Greek origin were not receiving their food or ministry. The twelve apostles summoned the whole church in the first business meeting in history and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables." These leaders selected seven men, which some would argue with me were the forerunners to the *diaconate*. The more telling story of this passage, however, is the unleashing of the laity to do the work of ministry. There were, however, three key results of this activity: (1) the Word of God kept spreading throughout the city, (2) more people came to Christ, and (3) the hard core "unchurched" were reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This concept of pastoral leadership touches on another issue. We asked the pastors of the churches, "How many hours do you spend in sermon preparation per sermon per week?" The pastors in the effective evangelistic churches indicated that they spend an average of ten hours, per sermon, per week. If these leaders preach two sermons per week, then they spend an average of twenty hours per week in sermon preparation. The pastors in the control group spend an average of two hours, per sermon, per week in sermon preparation.

Can we conclude that spending more time in sermon preparation means that these pastors will reach more unchurched? No, but we must recognize a clear correlation. We must look at this relationship and ask the question, "Why?" By the way, when we asked the formerly unchurched about preaching, they told us that this activity held an important role in their decision to stay in the church and come to Christ. These people gave us two descriptions of effective preaching. First, this preaching was relevant. The formerly unchurched indicated that they understood what the preacher was saying. Second, this preaching was text-driven. The text of Scripture "drove" the essential thrust of the message.

The Issue of Quality

When asked about the music, many of the formerly unchurched used the word "blended," as well as the word "contemporary." Very few of these people used the word "traditional." Blended has such a broad meaning, and it carries different connotations with different people. The point is that there was a definite concern on the part of the unchurched about the quality of music, and some of these people indicated that they did not

stay in the church because the music was poor.

In addition the quality of the facilities was an important factor for the unchurched. Such pragmatic issues may seem “unspiritual,” but the formerly unchurched people, who were once without Christ, indicated that the quality of the facilities did make a difference in their coming to the church and ultimately to the Savior.

We also found that quality in small groups or Sunday School was critical. Eighty-five percent of the formerly unchurched remained in Sunday School, or in a small group. Only sixty-five percent of the transfer church group we studied was active in Sunday School or a small group. The formerly unchurched saw the value of being involved with a small group of Christians, studying and sharing with one another. Quality in small groups is essential for reaching the unchurched.

Concluding Thoughts

Two weeks ago my son Art asked me to come up to his room. I could tell that he was really hurting about something. He does not like to show his emotions, but I could tell that he was on the verge of tears. I said, “Buddy, what is wrong?” Art said, “Dad, it is Eric (Eric is the teen to whom he has been witnessing for almost two years). I continue to share Christ with him, but things are getting worse. He is involved in a cult, and he sent a letter to his school teacher threatening to kill people at the school and threatening to kill himself. Dad, I’m just so scared that Eric is going to die and go to hell without Jesus.” I looked at him and said, “Art, evangelism is sharing the good news of Jesus Christ and leaving the results up to God. You can’t convert anyone, only the Holy Spirit can do the work of conversion.”

Art paused for a moment, as his lip was trembling, and then he said, “Look on the bed. There is a brand new leather bound NIV Study Bible.” I said, “You’ve spent some of your savings, I see.” Art shook his head and said, “Look inside.” By this time tears were falling from his eyes. I looked inside and read the inscription which said, “To Art . . . I have yet to accept the Jesus you tell me about, but if I have ever seen Him, I have seen Him in you.”

This testimony is a sample of that which we heard from the unchurched again, and again, and again. The methodologies were great, the theology was sound, but somehow these former-

ly unchurched people saw Jesus in these effective evangelistic churches.

Writer

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