

How to reach the unchurched

by Thom Rainer

What makes an unchurched person visit a church for the first time and stay long enough to allow God to change their heart? Thom Rainer went to the unchurched themselves to find out. In a series of articles over the next few weeks, he'll share the top 15 characteristics present in churches that are effective in reaching the unchurched.

Christina, 34, is expecting her second child. Her husband, Tom, is one year older. Unlike many couples, they never faced a major crisis in their lives or marriage. They obviously love each other deeply.

Christina and Tom had been Christians for only seven months at the time of our interview. When they moved to a mid-sized city in North Carolina, they decided to visit a Southern Baptist church. I asked them what prompted them to visit a church.

"I honestly don't know," Christina responded. "I can't even remember Tom and I having much discussion about it."

Tom agreed, "Me either. Neither one of us had much of a church background. I guess we just decided it was the right thing to do."

Christina, Tom, and Amy, their 3-year-old daughter, visited Cross Springs Church. "We thought we'd start there," Christina commented, "because the building and grounds looked real neat from the car."

"What was your first impression?" I asked.

"I was driving," Tom said, "and I was impressed by how well all the parking was marked. We went to a guest-parking place. When we got out of the car, we were met by a man in a red coat who identified himself as a greeter for the church. He asked if he could take us to the preschool area."

Christina and Tom both began to speak about the worship service, but Christina paused to allow Tom to speak. "The people were incredibly friendly. The music was great – a blend of traditional hymns and contemporary songs. The first time I heard Richard (the pastor) preach, I was hooked. He communicated extremely well, and I found myself learning a lot about the Bible in just 30 minutes. And remember, I was totally ignorant of the Bible."

The family returned every Sunday. They were invited to and got involved in a couples' Sunday school class. When a couple from the class visited them at home and shared how they could become Christians, both Tom and Christina were ready.

But the story does not end there. Tom, Christina, and Amy had moved to North Carolina so that Tom could join the family company. Tom and Christina's lives were radically changed when they became Christians. Then Tom's parents started visiting the Baptist church, if for no other reason, to see what had happened to the young couple. Within two months, Tom's parents became Christians. Now Tom's older brother and his family are visiting the church.

I'd love to have that kind of story repeated thousands of times in years to come – to be repeated in your church as well. Therefore, in the following articles, I will summarize 15 characteristics of churches

that are effective in reaching the unchurched. See how your church measures up.

1. Major on majors

Though I remain an obnoxious optimist about the future of the American church, I admit that I have my concerns. In my roles, past and present, as pastor, interim pastor, and church consultant, I have seen church members focus their energies on some of the most insignificant issues.

Some members demand their brand of music. Others get irritated when the order of worship is changed. Some members will complain when a minister does not make every telephone call he is expected to make. Others fuss when the sermon goes five minutes too long. Some members seem to worship their buildings and location. Others seem to have forgotten how to worship God. And in the meantime, tens of thousands die to face a Christ-less eternity, and so few church members seem to care.

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 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

In my denomination we have been involved in a quarter-of-a-century "battle for the Bible." When Southern Baptists talk theology among themselves, the discussion is often perceived to be political. But it must be said without hesitation that churches reaching 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. I have yet to discover a church that consistently reaches the unchurched over a several-year period that is not conservative in its theology.

3. Give evangelism priority and passion

To be honest, I thought only rarely of the need to tell others about Christ two decades ago. Even though God had called me to ministry, and even though I had left my lofty successful position in the business world, I only had passing thoughts of the need to share Christ. But in 1983, my priorities were turned upside down.

One of the first courses I took as a seminary student was personal evangelism with Dr. Lewis Drummond. Two aspects of the course changed my life. First, Dr. Drummond had a passion for evangelism. We students were particularly mesmerized by his stories of M.L. Oneal, a layman of a church where Dr. Drummond had once served as pastor. "Oneal," as our professor called him, would not let a day pass without sharing Christ. Even as Oneal was being taken to surgery where he would die, he was telling the medical attendants about Jesus. What a passion Oneal and Dr. Drummond had for Christ!

Dr. Drummond did not limit our studies to his lectures. Every week he required us to share the Gospel with a lost person. I wrote letters to lost family members. I witnessed on the streets of Louisville, Ky., I told my barber about Jesus. I intentionally developed relationships with unchurched persons. I developed a priority for evangelism that changed my life!

What do vibrant churches such as: [Saddleback Church](#) (Lake Forest, Calif.); [Prestonwood Baptist Church](#) (Dallas); [Southeast Christian Church](#) (Louisville, Ky.); [First Baptist Church](#) (Jacksonville, Fla.); Parkway Wesleyan Church (Roanoke, Va.); and [Xenos Christian Fellowship](#) (Columbus, Ohio) all have in common? They all make evangelism a priority.

I have visited all of these 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.

Too many church leaders seek to copy the methodologies of growing churches without emulating their hearts. Never expect to be a church for the unchurched unless you have a passion for evangelism.

Out of our study of the formerly unchurched came 15 characteristics that were common among all of the churches that were reaching the unchurched. In [Part 1](#) of this series, we reviewed the first three; this week we will look at four through nine. It is my prayer that you will examine these characteristics to see how your church measures up – and how it can improve.

4. Provide deep biblical teaching

Some readers may have been surprised by how vociferous the formerly unchurched were about their desires for strong biblical teaching. The evidence and data are clear. Both the formerly unchurched and the leaders of the churches that reached them verified the efficacy of "meaty" teaching and preaching to reach the unchurched and to strengthen the Christians. Strategies of recent years that sought to reach the unchurched through "lighter," less demanding teaching and preaching not only were ineffective, they were counterproductive as well.

5. 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. And in the churches we studied, Sunday school was the dominant expression of small groups.

What does this information say to churches that desire to reach the unchurched? It tells us that a comprehensive and effective small group strategy is imperative. I regret that in the churches I pastored before becoming dean of a seminary I provided little leadership to the Sunday school organization. Because of my ignorance and immaturity, I allowed the Sunday school to exist without any aggressive leadership and input on my part.

Now, because of 11 years of research, I see the utter stupidity of my failure. The work required to develop any kind of comprehensive small group organization is massive. Such work demands senior pastor involvement and leadership. Without it the church will not be nearly as effective in reaching the unchurched.

6. Discern patterns of relationships in your own church

One of the many surprises of our study was that one of the best connections to reach the unchurched was Christian wives reaching their unchurched husbands. We often think of the unchurched as people in totally pagan backgrounds who have no connection with the church. What our study told us was that many of the unchurched might be living in the same homes as our church members.

In a recent church consultation, I had a large proportion of the church members write the names of three unchurched people they knew well and then to note their relationships with these people. Again, the members were surprised to discover that a majority of their unchurched connections were in their own families. The church consequently developed new strategies to reach these people.

7. Check your facilities

The formerly unchurched spoke cogently of the necessity of having neat, clean, and updated facilities to reach people.

"I saw a lot of things through unchurched eyes before I became a Christian a few months ago," one participant responded. "What surprised me was how many churches let their facilities and their landscaping go to the dogs. It was as if they were advertising 'we don't care' by the way they looked. I sure didn't go back to those places."

Have an outsider look at your facilities honestly and objectively. Ask her to go to the restrooms, kitchen, sanctuary, and offices. Let her look at classrooms and pre-school space. Ask her opinion about the grounds and landscaping. In my consultation ministry, I have discovered that most eyesores can be remedied with a few donations and in-house, volunteer labor. And it is amazing to see how such projects can be tasks of church unity.

Realize that one of the most critical areas for cleanliness, attractiveness, and modern equipment is the pre-school. Dozens of formerly unchurched people told us that the quality of the pre-school was one of the key issues that attracted them to a church.

Signage is important to the unchurched as well. A few thousand dollars invested in a quality outdoor sign and indoor directional signs are wise expenditures. The unchurched are often terrified to come to a strange church. As unlikely as it may sound, good signage could make an eternal difference in someone's life.

8. Cultivate a user-friendly greeter ministry

The formerly unchurched appreciated the presence of greeters. Listen to some of their specific recommendations and preferences:

- Greeters should be clearly identifiable, with coats, badges or some other type of clear marking.
- Provide a welcome center with good and updated information on the church.
- Make certain your greeters represent a cross section of ages. Most churches tend to have mostly senior adults serve as greeters.
- Train greeters. "You won't believe some of the dumb comments I heard from greeters," Pat D. from Pennsylvania said. "The church would have been better off with no greeters." Greeters need training on how to greet, what to say, and what their primary functions are.
- 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.

9. Keep the friendliness issue before the church

If we Christians on earth could attain sinless perfection, we would not need reminders to be happy and friendly. Meanwhile, church leaders must remind members to be friendly at all times. One smile, one kind word could make an eternal difference for an unbeliever.

As I have said elsewhere, 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 do not see themselves from the perspective of an outsider. They do not realize that, while they speak to people they know and people they see each week, the outsider has no such connections. They need to be reminded each week to be friendly. 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.

10. Seek excellence

The fellowship of many churches has become havens for mediocrity. 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.

"I got to the point as I visited churches," Doug L. said, "that I began to believe that churches didn't give a rip about anything. It was a big letdown until I found Faith Community Church." Faith is the church that Doug eventually joined, the place where he accepted Christ. "Thank God for the people of Faith!" Doug exclaimed. "Their attitude of excellence may have been the difference between heaven or hell for me."

11. 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. Most of the effective churches in our study combined the inquirers' class with a new members' class. We need to remember that an unchurched person who visits our churches typically has an insatiable appetite to learn more. That's the reason they desire strong biblical teaching and preaching. And that's the reason they eagerly attend an inquirers' class.

12. Expect much, receive much

Churches that reach the unchurched are high-expectation churches. Their members are excited and fulfilled Christians. They belong to an organization that makes a difference. They gladly share their faith, invite friends and family members to church, and generally express excitement about their church. Leaders of these churches do not hesitate to ask members to get involved in ministry. They constantly urge them to develop a witnessing lifestyle.

High-expectation churches receive much because they expect much. The unchurched are in turn attracted to churches where the people are excited about their faith and the church where they serve.

13. Know your church's purposes

Churches that reach the unchurched know the purposes for which the church exists better than comparison churches. We categorized the six major purposes of the church according to Acts 2:42-47:

- Worship
- Evangelism
- Ministry
- Prayer

- Fellowship
- Discipleship/equipping

A church that understands its purposes is more likely to evaluate itself according to those purposes. If the people of the church truly understand that evangelism is one of their major functions, they will ask questions if lost people are not being reached, and they will seek to be more effective in that area.

How do leaders help the people of the church learn the purposes of the church? They write mission statements. The pastors preach it, and the teachers teach it. They put it on publications. They repeat it. The purpose driven church is more likely to be an unchurched-reaching church.

14. 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. Many of these churches have rigid and antiquated rules that prohibit ministry involvement of new members. I understand that new Christians should not be made Bible teachers immediately. But why not get them involved in a greater ministry? I promise their smiles will not be forced. Why not get them involved in an evangelistic ministry? They probably know more unchurched people than anyone else in the church. A pastor in California said quite bluntly, "We try to get new Christians involved quickly before they get over Jesus!"

15. 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. Indeed, I feel as though I have not given adequate attention to the power of prayer in this discussion. 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.

Evangelizing the unchurched is spiritual warfare. Satan and his demonic horde will do anything they can to hinder someone from becoming a believer. Only prayer can effectively break the bonds of complacency, tradition, and nitpicking that keep a church's focus off evangelism.

Most of the effective churches in our study not only had pervasive prayer ministries; they made certain these prayer ministries included a specific focus on lost and unchurched persons.

Lest we forget as well, the leaders of churches that reached the unchurched were people of prayer. And while an average of 45 minutes per day in prayer may seem small, the effective church leaders' prayer lives were more time-consuming than the anemic level of most Christians. Prayer is powerful. And prayer is a requisite to reach the unchurched.