

## Reaching The “Unchurched”

Ryan Goodwin

In a book titled *Surprising Insights From the Unchurched and Proven Ways To Reach Them*, the author, Thom S. Rainer, points out some interesting and startling results of a number of surveys that have been taken revealing what attracts people to churches. Denominations have been trying for decades to appeal to the “unchurched” – a classification of people who do not attend anywhere, but may be interested in looking – by changing their worship styles and content, altering their preaching, and offering social programs that make the potential church members feel both welcome and distracted. There is a trend amongst churches today to advertise themselves as desirable to new members. They want to portray themselves as being “your” church, designed especially for your needs and offering all of the things that you want out of your church experience. Contrary to common thinking, the surveys presented by Rainer uphold the startling assertion that gimmicks do not work. In the following articles I want to consider some of them.

### The Name of the Church

Any casual look at churches today reveals that the trend is to abandon the “old-fashioned” sounding denominational titles and adopt a more neutral name that appeals to all people, supposedly. The logic is that a neutral name will make visitors feel more comfortable. However, the statistics say otherwise. *“For the most part, neither the presence nor the absence of a denominational name influenced the formerly unchurched’s decision to join a church... ‘The name of the church never really entered my mind. After all I really don’t choose a store because of its name’”* (Rainer, pp. 38-39).

Rather than being appealing, it would seem to me that having a very non-committal, neutral name would be a sign that a church lacks identity. Even worse, it could mean that a church does not want their visitors (or members, for that matter) to know what doctrines its leadership actually espouses. If a church needs to hide the fact that it is part of a particular denomination, then perhaps it should consider changing that fact and not merely its name.

When it comes to church names, Paul put it best: *“the churches of Christ salute you”* (Romans 16:16). There should be no need to put a *name* on the body of Christ. Anything we post on our building should be viewed as nothing but a description of who we are. We are Christ’s church (Acts 20:28), and if a congregation belongs to the Lord, then what is bad about confessing that? Rainer also notes that one effect the name of a church has on visitors is that it may reassure them that where they are attending is not some “fly by night” cult (Rainer, P. 40).

### Personal Evangelism

Another major myth that is addressed is the idea that unbelievers will be turned off by a direct attempt at personal evangelism. Some churches are mistaken when they discourage their members from appealing to a visitor for a Bible study. Instead, many church leaders want evangelism to be done through the “back door”, so to speak, by offering visitors child care, social programs, or non-church related activities, such as basketball nights or ice cream socials. Yet Rainer notes that his studies revealed over 50% of “unchurched” people were positively influenced by someone from the church

talking directly to them about their soul (Rainer, p. 20). True and honest Bible study will produce Christians, but social programs and fun only produce people who have yet to face their need for salvation. Do we want converts or customers? People who are attracted to a church *only* because of its programs are only customers. They consume instead of contribute. Their conversion often does not stem from a pricked heart (Acts 2:37), but from a desire to get something. Jesus and His disciples always placed the emphasis on direct personal contact (Matthew 28:19, Acts 8:4, 17:2-3), and the message was always one of salvation. Notice that in Acts 2, Peter's appeal to the crowd is not to join the church at Jerusalem because there was free food and fun times for all, but because they were sinners who needed salvation. His direct appeal was for their repentance, not their attendance at a social function.