

“Evangelism”
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“Shattering Myths about the Unchurched”

Churched Americans out-number unchurched Americans 55% to 45%.

Only forty-one percent of Americans attend church services on a typical weekend.

The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary began a research project on the unchurched in America. Over 350 interviews took place with new adult Christians and church members, most had been Christians for less than a year.

They asked these “formerly unchurched” what instruments God used to bring them to Christ. The motivation was to discover the “problem” that needed addressing, rather than simply treating the “symptoms.”

Only a small percentage of churches in America have recognized the problems of a growing lost and unchurched population. 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.

It was the formerly unchurched themselves that shattered some myths about reaching the unchurched population.



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

Most church strategies for reaching the unchurched seem to be cookie-cutter approaches which do not readily replicate their success in communities that may be quite different in their ethnic or cultural background.

William B. from Memphis, TN, a 23-year old African-American man, with little church background:

- Went to church with his grandmother as a birthday gift to her.

- After finding the church alive with hearty singing of black gospel music, he continued to attend, becoming involved in different ministries and programs. Even sermons an hour in length did not bother him.
- Asking his grandmother questions about God, Christ, and the gospel, she patiently explained to him how he could become a Christian.

Lee Strobel, a reporter for the Chicago Tribune with a law degree, was an atheist.

- Met Christ through the ministry of Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago.
- Became a teaching pastor at Willow Creek, years later accepting a similar position at Saddleback Valley Community Church in Southern California.
- His book, “Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary,” is an account of his 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.

The methods used to reach Lee Strobel would probably have proved highly ineffective with William B. in Memphis, but they may have been effective with someone else.

The unchurched are not a monolithic group. Adjust your tools and methods as needed.



Myth #2: The Unchurched Never Attend Church

- The survey indicates that there are few Americans who never attend church.
- If we define 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.
- The study found that the church was neither strange nor frightening to them when they visited.

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

- When a portion of the study group was asked how often they visited a church a year prior to joining a church, none said zero times.
- 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.
- On Easter Sunday in 1999, twelve percent of atheists and agnostics attended a Christian church service. 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.



Myth #3: 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.
- He gladly filled out the guest cards as requested in the service and did not mind hearing from the pastor by letter and receiving information about the church.
- When he received a telephone call from the church, requesting the opportunity to visit him, he agreed. Mark says the two men from the church got right to the point. “They explained to me how I could become a Christian, and I’ve been in church ever since.”
- The formerly unchurched in the 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.
- The majority of the formerly unchurched who were personally evangelized said that someone made an effort to see them within a month of their visit to the church.



Myth #4: The Pastor Must Be a Dynamic and Charismatic Leader for the Church to Reach the Unchurched

Joe M. of eastern Kentucky said of his pastor, “He’s a great guy but I’ve heard a lot of better preachers. Sometimes he doesn’t seem to have the best organizational skills. But our church keeps growing and reaching lost people.”

- Pastors themselves often comment 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 said, “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 #5: We Must Be Careful in Our Teaching and Preaching Not to Communicate Complex Biblical Truths That Will Confuse the Unchurched

Susan M., a life-long unchurched person living in the Chicago area:

- “What really frustrated me was that I had a deep desire to understand the Bible, to hear in-depth preaching and teaching, but most of the preaching was so watered-down that it was insulting to my intelligence.”
- 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 was learned from the survey is that we should never dilute biblical teachings for the sake of the unchurched.

Jennifer K., a Minnesota resident who expressed similar sentiments. She said the first time she watched CNBC, the program used a language that contained some strange phrases, like stock splits, P/E ratio, and NASDAQ. Sometimes she had to go to the dictionary or the Internet to learn, but 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.

- Similar comments to Jennifer’s were repeated by many of the formerly unchurched.
- When asked if the doctrine or belief of the church they eventually joined was important, ninety-one percent of the formerly unchurched indicated that the doctrine was an important factor that attracted them to the church.



Myth #6: The Sunday School and Other Small Groups Are Ineffective in Attracting the Unchurched

- Research shows that the formerly unchurched are positive about and attracted to Sunday school.
- Nearly seven out of ten formerly unchurched were active in Sunday school.
- Chris R., a formerly unchurched forty-two-year-old man from Oklahoma expressed the views of many whom were 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?”
- Almost twenty percent of the churches in the study called their Sunday morning small group “Bible study,” but no formerly unchurched expressed concerns about the name.



Myth #7: 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.
- The study of the formerly unchurched found that family member relationships were even more important.
- Wives were the ones most often mentioned as important in influencing the formerly unchurched to Christ and the church.

Art R., a Florida native: “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 a Christian, and hardly ever miss church.”

- Over one-third of this group indicated that their wives were the key influence.
- Husbands ranked below wives, children, and parents in leading their loved ones to come to church.
- 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 # 8: The Unchurched Are Concerned Only about Their Own Needs

- The reasons the unchurched become church members are complex.
- The unchurched often desire to be challenged.
- Bobby J. of Pennsylvania told the surveyors, “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.”
- An important lesson learned from the formerly unchurched is that churches should try to appeal to the unchurched person’s unselfish motives.
- Bobby T. expressed it well: “Before I became a Christian, I knew I wanted to be in a place where I could make a difference. Do not dumb down the church or water down expectations.”
- The formerly unchurched do not always seek a place of worship for their own needs. Almost one out of three came or returned to the church for their children.
- Studies have affirmed that the most receptive years to the gospel are before people turn twenty years old.
- Many of the unchurched seem to know that “religious training” is necessary for their children, even though they cannot articulate specific reasons why.

- Bobby T. explained: “I’m a single dad with almost year-round custody of two kids, ages nine and eleven. 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.”
- The unchurched do indeed have motives for seeking churches beyond their own personal felt needs.



Myth # 9: The Unchurched Are Turned Off by Denominational Names in the Church Name

- The name of the church had very little influence on reaching the unchurched.
- Neither having the denominational name reflected in the church name, nor leaving the denominational name out of the church name was a factor in their decision to join the church.
- Mark R.: “The name of the church never really entered my mind. I didn’t have a clue what a Wesleyan church was, but that’s not what got me interested in the church.”
- Over eighty percent of the formerly unchurched said that the church name had little or no influence upon their joining a particular church.
- Of those who said the church name did affect their decision-making process, nearly two-thirds indicated that the denominational name was a positive influence on their decision.

Jane L., from Little Rock, Arkansas:

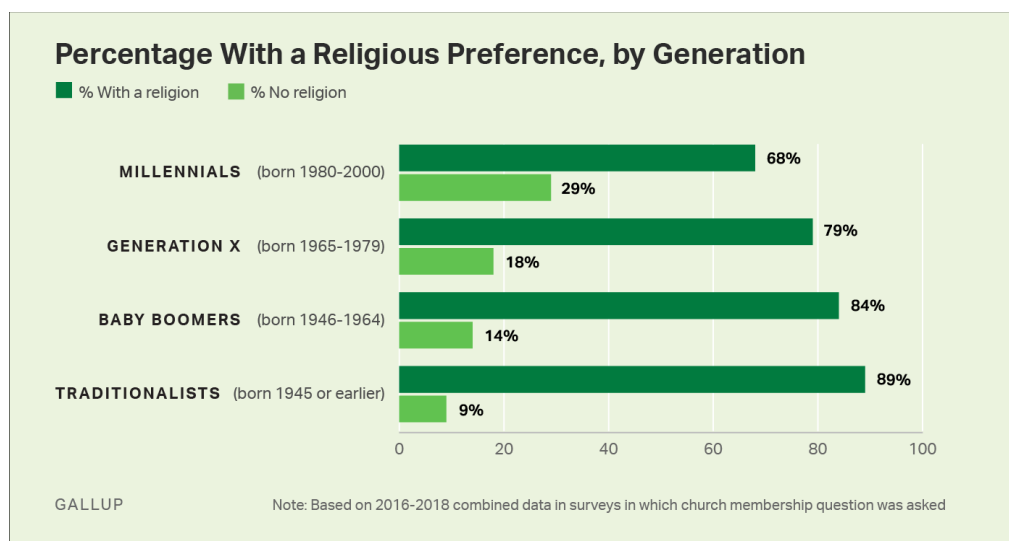
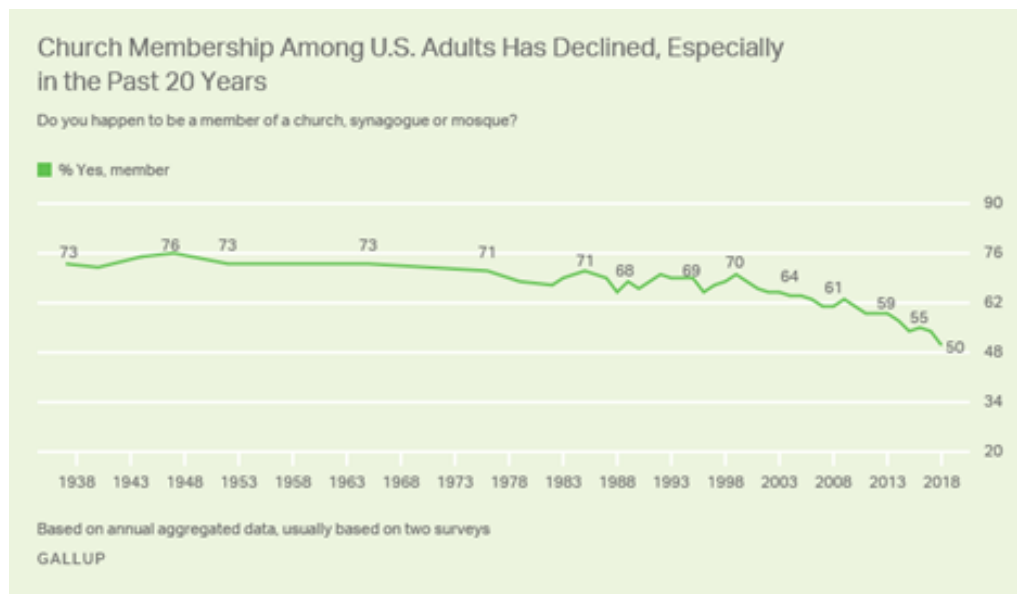
- “Seeing Baptist in the name gave me some assurance that the church was not some wacko cult.” Since her Baptists friends were “normal” people, she thought the church would be okay.
- Only four-percent of the formerly unchurched indicated that a denominational name had a negative influence upon them as they sought a church home.
- One out of eight formerly unchurched said that a denominational name actually influence them positively.
- When it comes to the numerous surveys that indicate that certain denominational names were perceived negatively in the eyes of the unchurched ... Evelyn F., 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, she said she could have cared less what the name of the church was. She was lonely and hurting and needed to find a community that cared.

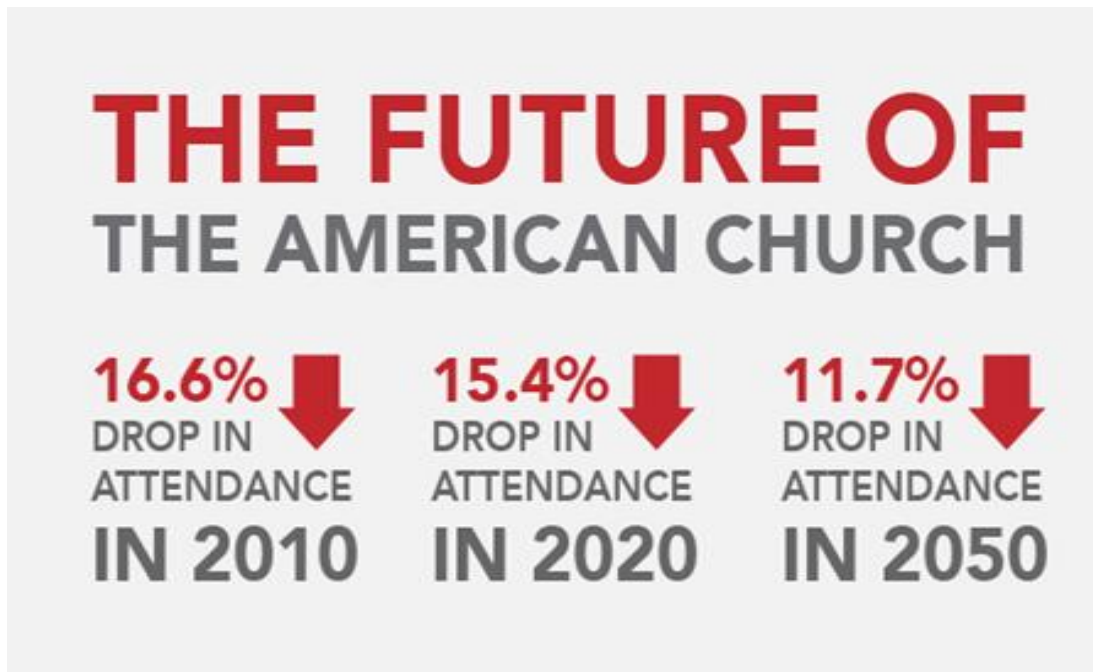
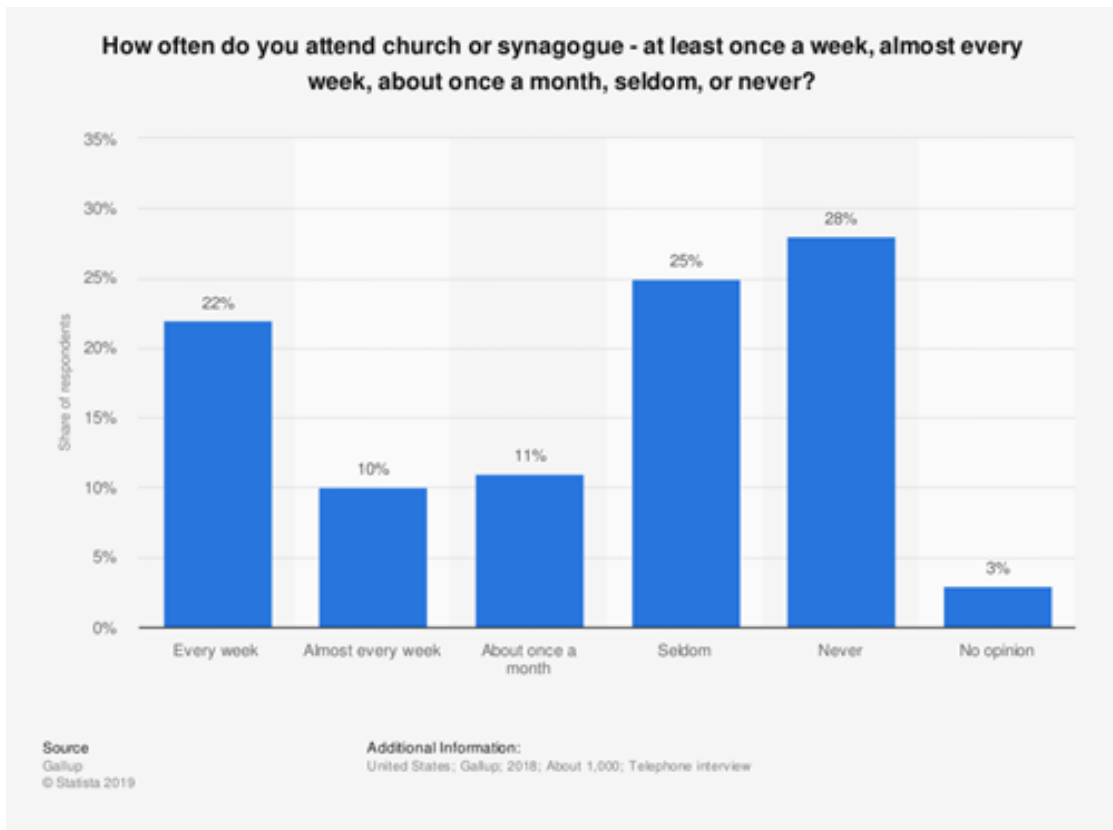
New Insights/New Strategy:

As the percentage of unchurched in our nation continues to increase, is it possible we have been asking the wrong people the wrong questions? 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 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.

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.





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