

# *The Unchurched*

## **MARKETING RESEARCH BULLETIN**

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Research reviews for church leaders.





Welcome to the *Marketing Research Bulletin*, a periodic report created for all Unity leaders, by the Association of Unity Churches Communications Department. This Bulletin provides valuable information on recent trends affecting church growth.

Information overload is a part of modern life, and data on trends affecting churches is no exception. We created these bulletins to give a quick reading for busy church leaders. We read multiple resources, including books and articles written by church growth experts, business writers and trend watchers in many disciplines. For those interested in greater depth, we have included listings for

further reading. In addition, to make it as practical as possible, we give ideas of implications for churches.

It is with love and awe for ministers, and those leaders who work alongside them, that we dedicate this work. And with blessings!

Lisa Wittman  
VP Communications  
Ext. 349, email: [dom@unity.org](mailto:dom@unity.org)



Communications  
P.O. Box 610  
Lee's Summit, MO 64063  
816.524.7414  
[www.unity.org](http://www.unity.org)

When you think about people your ministry can serve, who are they? Do they currently attend another church, or none at all? Certainly one of the most interesting segments that churches can consider is the unchurched. In order to reach them, it will be critical to understand who they are, their interests, and how to communicate with them. Since church leaders are churched, there is an inherent need to look with new eyes when planning ways to reach the unchurched. This can be a true paradigm shift.

Following is a compilation of information about this group taken from many resources and workshops. A resource list is given for those interested in further study.

### Unchurched, Defined

What constitutes an unchurched person? By George Barna's definition, anyone who has not attended a church service in the last six months is unchurched. Many of these people are listed on membership rolls at a given church. But membership is no longer a useful statistic, since it does not indicate attendance or participation in the way that it used to. Whether Barna's definition appeals to you or not, the important thing is to use the same one for discussion so that comparisons across time and place make sense. The unchurched make up 32% of the population, up from 25% before 1990. There is some fluidity in this group, as it changes by about 10% to 15% every year. At least that number are open to attending church every year.

A further definition of interest is the idea of the "underchurched," those who attend every four to six weeks. This group makes up about 26% of the population. The last group, the "firmly churched," make up 42% of the population.

#### Demographic Profile

Most of the unchurched are men (61%). About half of them are 25 to 45 years old (most of these fall into the Boomer group, with a few X'ers), and more than half are single. Their median household income of \$31,540 exceeds the national average and that of the churched population. They also are twice as likely to have completed college as are the churched. All of these factors lead to the conclusion

that the unchurched tend to be more sophisticated, upscale and independent than the churched.

#### Issues of Importance

The most important issues on their minds relate to money. Almost half identified financial worries or employment issues as their most pressing concerns (especially for the Boomers and X'ers). The next most common issue was health problems (especially for the older group). Family difficulties, social/political and parenting issues were all cited. Noticeably absent were concerns about morality, spirituality or ethical behavior.

When asked about the elements most important in their lives, they chose the following top ten, in order of frequency:

- good health
- close friendships
- comfortable lifestyle
- clear purpose for living
- live to an old age
- live close to family, relatives (seems to echo the desire for community)
- close relationship with God
- active sex life
- high-paying job
- influence other people's lives

Those who are churched place a higher value on a "close relationship with God" as well as "influence other people's lives." Note that when people in churches are planning programs for the unchurched, they must consider the change in agenda - make no assumptions that the unchurched hold the same value for these two items. As people become congregants and grow spiritually, their priorities typically become more like the churched. Yet to bring them in and engage them initially, we must be sensitive to the difference.

#### Religious Background

Eighty-five percent of unchurched people have attended a church for an extended period of time in their lives. The younger the person, the less likely this is to be true. Their church backgrounds generally reflect the denominational affiliations in the population as a whole. That is, the most common

previous affiliations, in order, are Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, Episcopal, and Church of Christ. (These also vary with geographic area.) The majority of unchurched come from medium sized churches (attendance of 100 up to 1000), with few from megachurches and small churches. About 17% are “born again Christians.”

How do they view churches and Christianity as a whole? About two thirds had a favorable impression of Christianity, while 19% had an unfavorable view. Contrast this with the view of local churches, where about 57% had a favorable view. The more affluent the person, the less likely she was to have a favorable image of local churches or of Christianity.

Eighty-five percent of unchurched women pray at least once a month, while only 60% of unchurched men do. Other activities engaged in to a much lesser extent included watching religious TV, reading the Bible, religious magazine or book, listening to a religious radio program, or attending a small group Bible study. Boomers and X’ers are less likely to think that religion is important than older groups. Women and people from lower income households tended to think it more important. Almost half of the unchurched think that the opinions of friends and family have the greatest impact on their lives, as opposed to religion.

### Beliefs

Half believe in God as an omnipotent and omniscient Creator of the universe who is still at work in the world today. (75% of the church members believe this.) The younger the person, the less likely he is to have a so-called “orthodox” view of God. Women have a greater tendency toward this belief than men.

The main reason underlying their non-attendance is that they do not see the church offering anything worth the time and effort. Ten percent say they do not believe in God and they dislike organized religion so much that they would never return. However, most simply feel that there are many options competing for their time, and that the church does not effectively compete.

Other research, conducted in the startup phase of several megachurches, gives more specific insights. The top reasons for not attending can be summarized like this:

- “It’s boring. The sermon doesn’t relate to my life.”
- “Church members are unfriendly to visitors. If I go, I want to feel welcomed without being embarrassed.”
- “They’re more interested in my money than in me.”
- “We worry about the quality of the church’s child care.” (This, of course, came from young couples.)

How likely are they to return? A large 56% said they would probably or definitely not return. The rest indicated some openness to it. Those most likely to return are non-whites, women, and those who were formerly church members. Age had no apparent influence on this question.

## Why Attend?

The unchurched identified the top five reasons that would be compelling to them:

- to find out more about God
- for children to receive religious teaching
- to improve understanding of the Bible
- it would be a place to meet other people
- to learn better ways of dealing with everyday problems

When asked about what a dream church would look like, there was a variety of answers. It seems apparent that there is no one “right” form or style of services. Even though a disproportionate number of unchurched people end up in megachurches, they indicated a preference for a small church. Barna concludes that this is because they want to be cared for and appreciated on a human scale. It lends credence to the idea that small groups in the church give the “high touch” factor that is so important to people today. It also confirms the overriding importance of relationships and community.

Sixteen percent of unchurched adults would be open to attending multiple churches on a rotating basis, while 85% would find one and stick with it. They are most likely to find a church through word of mouth (over half said this) - especially through recommendations of friends or relatives. Young adults and women would find this method more important than others. Advertising would be a method of learning about churches for 27%.

### Communications

As for the content of advertising, the most interesting pieces of information would be:

- whether it is a Christian church
- denomination (they are leery of major denominations)
- church location
- time of services

They are less likely to be interested in the history of the church, the sermon title, pastor's name, quotes from attenders or how many people attend.

Few methods of getting people to consider the church gained widespread support. Personal invitations remain the most important and likely to be accepted method.

Another strong possibility is providing high-quality, high-interest events to which current attendees feel comfortable inviting their friends.

Programs that showed up as having the highest interest were, in order:

- volunteering to assist the needy
- get together with group your age and lifestyle, for social activities
- attend church-sponsored fun activities
- Sunday morning worship

Three other types of effort were considered interesting:

- invited to attend by mailed brochure
- church-sponsored seminars about problems of personal interest - open to the community
- church-sponsored musical concert - open to the community

Once they become visitors, majorities had strong negative feelings about:

- identifying self during service
- thank you gift delivered to home
- asked to wear name tag
- visit to their homes the week after visiting the church

In fact, most want no special treatment, though they want to know that the church is genuinely friendly,

and what it has to offer them. Greeting them informally after the service is appreciated, as is receiving church information from ushers. Herb Miller suggests that the traditional "pew pad" has the advantage of alerting congregants to newcomers near them. Through this method they can be encouraged to give a friendly greeting.

### Implications for Unity Churches

1. Relevance is of the utmost importance, and not necessarily as defined by current congregants. To reach the unchurched, we need to present the message in a style that they can understand. This includes:

- Language that is commonly understood "on the street" - be careful about terminology that only occurs in Unity - we may be familiar with it, but outsiders may not.
- Music that is culturally relevant to the group you are targeting - this is especially age-sensitive. Herb Miller states that the population born before 1927 connects with God best through the old gospel hymns (written 1900-35), those born in 1927-46 favor classic hymns of the church (written 200 to 300 years ago), and those born after 1946 prefer hymns written since 1960.
- Sunday morning service - this is the time when unchurched people are most likely to attend. Excellence and entertainment are also important components of the service - remember, this is what people are used to in our culture. This is not about watering down the meaning, but about making it more culturally relevant so that people can "hear" the meaning. Think about it as beginning with "where they are" - a tradition Jesus himself practiced.
- Message - the most important thing about the message is that it connect with people as they live their daily lives. They want to know God and experience God, not just talk about God.
- Small groups - as mentioned earlier, these are important because they allow people to become assimilated, and they offer community and relationships that are so crucial.

2. Excellence is expected. Think of how the quality of all products and services has increased. We live in a consumer society. Without making a value judgement, it means that we are used to having our needs catered to. When we find something that does not fit our needs, we move on to the next option - and there are always more options. People bring this mind-set to their interaction with all organizations, including churches.
3. Options - this is one reason why megachurches are so attractive to the unchurched. They offer specialized opportunities, and many of them, to meet the needs of their constituents. As stated earlier, there are always more options in our society, to the point that the main competition for churches now goes beyond other churches. As an example, Sunday morning time with the family, the newspaper, and the game (name the sport) are all viable competitors for Sunday morning worship. We must offer attractive options that fill needs in order to attract the unchurched.
4. Outreach - there is renewed interest in helping those less fortunate. Service translates into a personal growth opportunity for potential congregants - and the trend is ever more toward hands-on service. At the same time, this is an attraction point for the unchurched. Churches that do community service can become better known in the community, and can develop a positive image (you can't buy this kind of image). They also demonstrate the practicality and authenticity of faith by practicing it in this way.
5. Advertising can be part of the communications, keeping it in perspective as only a part. It is best to find ways to encourage current congregants to invite. Publicity, especially for programs that touch the community in some way, should also be a part of the communication plan. Advertising on the church page or in other religious media will never reach the unchurched - so be sure to select other avenues. The lifestyle or sports sections may be more fruitful. Put yourself in the shoes of someone who does not normally think about spirituality before creating your message. Contact Marketing and Pub-

lic Relations at the Association - we are working to develop advertisements for different target groups.

6. For more information on generational differences, ask for our Marketing Research Bulletin entitled, Generations.

## Bibliography

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*Church for the Unchurched* , George G. Hunter, 1996, Abingdon Press.

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*The New Reformation* , Lyle Schaller, 1995, Abingdon Press.

*The Purpose Driven Church* , Rick Warren, 1995, Zondervan Publishing.

We also appreciate the work of Rev. David Owen Ritz, Center for Positive Living in Sarasota, Florida and Rev. Roger Teel, Mile Hi Church of Religious Science in Lakewood, Colorado. Both presented workshops incorporating these topics during the Church Growth and Development Conference in March, 1998.