



Unchurched Believers

Possibilities, Potential and Power

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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Who are the unchurched believers in your community? How do you define unchurched believers? How do you locate unchurched believers? What are the possibilities, potential and power in this ministry?

As the author of ***Spiritual Leadership in a Secular Age: Building Bridges Instead of Barriers*** I was invited to facilitate a group of unchurched believers. They explained to me they are persons with a serious spiritual appetite, curiosity, and appreciation of supreme powers greater than themselves. They continued their self description by declaring a growing skepticism and disinterest in the institutional church, but searching for a community that nurtures their faith, hope and love in ways that impacts their world in ways that would be pleasing to God.

A 2006 report indicated 61 percent of regular church attenders as teenagers left the church in their 20's, and now missiologists declare that about 70 percent of North Americans are currently considered unchurched.

As a Christian minister I found the group of unchurched believers rejuvenating to my faith and increasing of my hope for the mission of God in the world. In some ways my interaction reignited my hope for the church; not the institution, but the mission of the church in the world. These 30-plus persons ranged in age from 20 to 69, some with church and baptism in their history, but most apathetic toward the institutional church. At the same time they were seriously spiritual and hungry for more knowledge of who God is and how God moves and what caused God to create them.

I left this five hour interaction challenged, encouraged, and hopeful. I must confess I do not often leave formal church services this way; rather I often leave discouraged, beaten down, under challenged, and sometimes even feeling used or abused.

I found myself, at times, struggling with the juxtaposition of unchurched believers. My tradition is that believers are connected to a congregation, and really most would say as a believer in God you are commissioned to be part of the local church. The major difference for this group is they want a community of faith that is more serious about engaging in God's mission than building a local church.

It seems that many believe the greatest obstacle to accomplishing God's mission is the intense preoccupation with building and sustaining the local church. They desire to be people of impact and influence touching their families, communities, and world. I have relatives, who grew up in a local church, and now they are people who honor basic Christian virtues, but rarely attend church and even declare, "Watch out for those Christians they will get you every time".

I have been honored to walk with a group of spiritual travelers over the last two decades. They share many of the same characteristics of the unchurched believers. I acknowledge that these opportunities have been filled with steep learning curves, many uncomfortable moments and challenges, but also many times that have fueled my faith in Christ and my hope in and for the Church. I have been challenged to learn language that preserves the faith, but communicates effectively to a younger digital generation. I have learned to listen more than talk, and ask powerful coaching questions more than make declarative statements. I increasingly see myself as a coach who helps others discover truth on their own, and explore possibilities and consequences of missing the mark or choosing to live in denial.

I too have learned to focus on God's mission rather than the church's agenda that often distracts and generates fear, fatigue and frustration. Permit me to share some clues for those who are curious about building bridges with unchurched believers and spiritual travelers.

Clues the church might consider when it comes to developing a ministry that speaks to the needs, interests and spiritual appetites of unchurched believers.

1. Create non-threatening entry points.
2. Utilize networks, social media and the power of community to identify people, issues, challenges, passions, opportunities and interests.
3. Connect spiritual formation issues/questions with media (film, television, music, online blogs, forums, online video).
4. Tune in with a sensitive ear rather than a telling posture.
5. Open to story, community and the power of prayer.
6. Seek to build relationships not membership for church.
7. Seek to introduce them to the Christ in you and seek the Christ in them.
8. Create places of community, safe places and opportunities for exploration and dialogue that is on their turf not church facilities.
9. Create community through service opportunities that speaks to the spiritual, justice, social and economic needs of others.
10. Create teams/communities of church members, affirm and equip them to generate communities of hope, healing and service beyond the walls of the church.
11. Provide prayer teams/focus groups that discern next steps, partnership opportunities in the community and bridge-building relationship catalysts.
12. Invite exploration of faith and issues without judgment, discouragement, isolation or accusation.

The reality is about 70 percent of the population in North America are considered by some as unchurched, and the church culture is steadily declining out with a growing number of young adults opting out of active membership. There are more unchurched than church members around us. Have you done a windshield survey (drive around and observe your community) and visited your community during the traditional Sunday services? There are many people in Wal-Mart, grocery stores, parks, mowing lawns and a host of other activities at 10 until Noon on Sundays.

Take time to visit your community during traditional church times and just see what is happening. What does the Holy Spirit say to you? How might you connect with some of these who choose not to be active in local churches? It seems to me with these realities there's much potential, possibility and power in considering ministry to unchurched believers. What do you think?

What would ministry look like to unchurched believers? A Facebook friend reversed this and asked, what about the church members? A great observation, but another article I suspect. How might we learn to create a safe and sacred space and place for the unchurched believers? What if we focused on this challenge rather than trying to get them into our churches?

One idea that I am currently engaged with is a real estate developer with a vision for his planned community to have a spiritual anchor for the unchurched, maybe church members, and seekers who would move into the community and need a safe place to stretch, grow in faith and mobilize in ways to

channel their passion, resources and build community. What a cool idea! What a great Christian leader and real estate agent who has such a fresh vision for a new community. I cannot wait to see what God does with this.

Another illustration from yet another real estate agent; buy a house, join a family is her mission. She then invites all those who buy from her to join annual community celebrations designed to build community and provide her, and others, an opportunity to share life's struggles, celebrations and discoveries with their surrogate family. How cool!

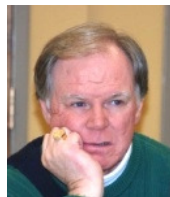
How many do you know who are looking for family in this highly mobile, diverse and increasingly unchurched culture? What if we, those of faith and Christian heritage, refocused on building missional communities and faith families rather than building church facilities and memberships? Just thinking. (Of course I know institutional churches are families of faith. I also know that many, many people will never enter the doors of such churches, but are attracted to other configurations and entry points for the faith journey)

Tools For the Journey

- Edward Hammett. ***Reframing Spiritual Formation: Discipleship for the Unchurched Culture***
- Edward Hammett. ***Spiritual Leadership in a Secular Age: Building Bridges Instead of Barriers***
- Brian McLaren. ***Finding Faith: A Search for What Makes Sense***
- Richard Cimino and Don Lattin. ***Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium***
- Carol Howard Merritt. ***Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation***
- Charlie Starr. ***Honest to God: Wrestling Your Way to Intimacy with the Creator***
- Lynne Baab. ***Friending: Real Relationships in a Virtual World***
- Barbara Orłowski. ***Spiritual Abuse Recovery: Dynamic Research on Finding a Place of Wholeness***
- Kevin Harney. ***Organic Outreach for Ordinary People: Sharing Good News Naturally***

*This article is from a longer chapter on this topic that will be part of forthcoming new manuscript with a working title **Recovering Hope for the Church**.*

Important Things to Know



Eddie Hammett is a Ministry Colleague with The Columbia Partnership. He will be speaking and building learning experiences around this topic in 2012 as research for the forthcoming book. He is a certified coach with the International Coach Federation. Recent books of which he is author or co-author are ***Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Over 60***, ***Spiritual Leadership in a Secular Age***, and ***Making Shifts Without Making Waves***. He is available for speaking and coaching with leaders, congregations, denominations and parachurch organizations. His personal web site is www.TransformingSolutions.org. His work is also highlighted at www.CBFNC.org.

The Columbia Partnership is a non-profit Christian ministry organization focused on transforming the capacity of the North American Church to pursue and sustain Christ-centered ministry. ***Travel Free Learning*** is a sharing knowledge emphasis of TCP. For more information about products and services check out the web site at www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org, send an e-mail to Client.Care@TheColumbiaPartnership.org, or call 803.622.0923.

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