

When It's Hard To Believe

What do non-Christians really think of you and your faith? Charisma's conversations with the unchurched might help you reach the unbelievers you encounter every day.

It could have been an irreverent sketch on something like Saturday Night Live. A roomful of pastors and evangelists were sitting in their chairs and biting their tongues while the guy on stage with the microphone told them why he didn't believe in their God.

But this was no comedy routine. It was a real-life role reversal that began with the Christian faithful who had assembled taking a "pledge of kindness" in which they promised not to preach but to listen—while asking the Holy Spirit to "speak to me," not to the unbelievers present.

Chris, on stage with the mike, was one of three non-Christians invited to talk about what he thought of born-again believers and their faith at a conference intended to hold a sometimes unflattering mirror up to the typical church and force Christian leaders to reflect on some of the reasons for the gulf between churches and the people outside.

Chris told how he felt "cheated" by the sneaky church event he had attended as a youngster. He'd been told a pro footballer was going to speak, but before he knew it everyone was being asked to bow their heads and pray.

Then there was the "born-again" guy at work with a Christian fish symbol on his business cards. He was always preaching, but the man's words and actions often didn't match what Chris

considered to be decent Christian behavior.

“His fish kind of stinks,” he quipped.

Chris said he believed in God and that Jesus died for his sins. “I consider myself a Christian. I don’t hurt other people. To me I am doing the right thing.” But he also noted that he believed in reincarnation.

Chris and his unorthodox views may have been in the minority at the Off the Map (see story on page 43) event at New Beginnings Church in Seattle, at which he was asked to share his beliefs with the group of charismatic and evangelical leaders. Outside of that setting, however, he is far from alone.

As Charisma found in a series of interviews with average nonchurchgoers across the country, a great many who consider themselves to be spiritual or religious have little or no time for church or the people who go there. Though Christians will celebrate the Resurrection this month, the good news simply isn’t for a lot of their relatives, friends, neighbors and co-workers.

And despite the fact that most opinion polls show a high percentage of the American population—80 percent or more—considers itself Christian, that belief is not matched by the number of people in the pews on Sundays. Even the widely reported “turning to God” that was prompted by the September 11 terrorist attacks did not last long. Church attendance returned to normal levels within a matter of weeks—even while there was still talk of a new spiritual openness in the nation.

What keeps people away? Charisma's diverse encounters, with everyone from businessmen and barroom philosophers to students and senior citizens, found a variety of reasons that offer a serious challenge to the body of Christ.

Some, like Chris, have been bruised by past encounters. Joyce in Orlando, Florida, believes that "people show their best side at church."

"They go and become very placid and forgiving, and then on the way out they run you over in the parking lot," she says. "I wish people could hold onto those good feelings they have in church a bit longer."

Young, a Los Angeles accountant, sees "a lot of people who claim to be Christians, then whenever Sunday is over, they are not what they seem to be in church."

Church? What's That?

But for the most part, Charisma's conversations revealed an even harsher reality: It is not that people do not think much of the church. It is that they do not think of the church, much. Religion, faith, God, Jesus simply are not on their personal radar screens.

Jim Henderson, the man who interviewed Chris in front of the believers who attended Off the Map, observes: "It's all fairly irrelevant to [non-Christians'] lives. It's not something they notice. If the mall and the church disappeared tomorrow, which would people miss most? The answer speaks to the irrelevancy of our institution in our culture."

He could have been talking about Matt and Stacey, a young couple who were strolling hand-in-hand in a mall one recent Sunday morning. Matt said he had last been to church during high school.

“It was great; I enjoyed it. But in this day and age, with so little time on our hands, I don’t believe you have to go to church to believe in God. If people have the time, that’s great, but it’s 3-1/2 hours I can’t afford.”

Many believers—whether it’s because their view is fueled by Christian groups relentlessly portraying the “world” as the enemy of conservative values or because they lack their own personal connection with nonchurchgoers—seem to think that those outside the church are vehemently opposed to their faith.

“Christians tend to think of non-Christians as hardcore pagans,” observes Thom Rainer, dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth, “[having] no level of receptivity to the gospel—maybe even antagonistic towards the church, if not belligerent. Many active Christians tend to think in black-and-white terms.”

Meanwhile those outside are increasingly thinking in terms of postmodern gray, in which there are no absolutes and everyone’s own idea of what is true is equally valid.

“The only thing I don’t like about Christianity is the teaching that there are no other possibilities out there,” says Dina, making the point. “The broad proclamation that Christianity is the only correct choice seems to me to be what breeds hatred, why people beat up and kill in the name of

God.”

Nor are such views held exclusively by the young. Middle-aged Gary thinks churches have some good things to teach, but “then [they] tend to think that it is necessary to throw in the fact that [theirs] is the only way to reach salvation, through their particular institution.”

“And I have trouble with that,” he says. “At some point or another they [are] always knocking someone else’s religion.”

Todd Hunter, the former national head of the Vineyard church movement who now coaches church planters, says such views are part of the legacy of “the death of Christendom” in the United States. He says that although there are regional pockets where Christianity is still an influence, for the most part “it’s over.”

But that can present more of an opportunity than an obstacle, he believes, noting how throughout history the church has often thrived most when it was on the fringes. He adds, however, that “the way we conceive of being and doing church will have to be significantly different.”

When churches no longer hold the central place in society they once did, the gospel they proclaim is more typically dismissed than derided. Rainer’s long-term study of unchurched people found that only 5 percent could be classified as extremely resistant to the gospel.

“People had overwhelmingly positive views of the church in general,” he says. “Most just did not perceive the church to relate to their life right now.”

Chris has visited several different churches in the last few years and has found the services variously “entertaining, useless, informative, depressing and uplifting.” None of his experiences were meaningful enough to make him want to go back again, though.

The last time Bob was in church was as a child, and he couldn’t wait to leave. He doesn’t see any value in organized religion.

“I consider religion or belief in some kind of higher power to be a very personal thing. I have my own philosophies and beliefs that don’t require me to worship a deity or to seek comfort in some kind of group-think.”

Mindy believes in God and thinks churches are good for the community, but she doesn’t attend.

“I worship God my own way. During the holidays and Christmas I think about God. I watch The Ten Commandments at Easter and do my own little special prayers. I can tell myself which way is wrong. I try to do it myself.”

Wanted: Non-Christians

Chris, Bob and Mindy highlight for pastor and TV host Jim Reeve one of the main problems—that “the way we do church is not touching your average person out there in America.” The senior pastor of the 6,000-strong Faith Community Church in West Covina, California, discovered a whole new world when he went out and talked to nonbelievers on the streets, conducting walkabout, Jay Leno-like interviews for his weekly Balanced

Living TV show.

When people were asked to name a famous evangelist, he says: "About half had heard of Billy Graham, but none had heard of T.D. Jakes. So the people who we [in the church] think are big names, they have no idea of."

His interviews confirmed for him that "people are not so much turned off to Jesus as they are turned off to the church." His conclusion was echoed by a recent discussion thread about faith at a teen-agers' Web site, which was titled: "I believe in God and Jesus, but not the church."

Recognizing that a lot of Christians lose contact with the unchurched world the longer they have been believers, Reeve began encouraging his people to make a point of finding "the needs, wants and perceptions of the nonbeliever."

Members have gone out to movie theaters—which Reeve says could almost be considered "the sanctuaries of the new millennium"—to strike up casual conversations.

When he was pastoring, Rainer used to pay a non-Christian to visit and critique the church from time to time. "It really opened our eyes," he recalled. Off the Map's Henderson advocates the same idea but observes that when most churches address issues involving non-Christians they prefer to role-play than to involve real-life outsiders.

"Do we think we are going to get polluted or something?" he asks.

Chris Maxwell doesn't just ask non-Christians their opinions, he has been known to elicit their help in preparing sermons.

Before a recent wedding, the Orlando pastor walked along the beach and asked people what he should tell the couple about married life. His subsequent message included the plea of a beer-drinking divorcé Maxwell had met for the newlyweds to remain faithful and not make the mistakes that had led to the end of his marriage.

Maxwell is sometimes surprised by the anger of those he talks with.

“They don’t believe God exists, but they blame Him when things go wrong,” he notes. But he keeps asking questions: “I want to know why they blame Him. I want to get to their inner pain, what they are feeling.”

Sadly, too many churches seem to prefer monologue to dialogue, laments Brian McLaren, pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, Maryland, and a leading thinker on evangelism in postmodern society.

“We talk, talk, talk, broadcast, publish, we don’t listen,” he says, noting that on the rare times we do, it doesn’t last long.

“With the first statement that we hear that makes us uncomfortable, we launch into more preaching, telling people why they’re wrong or shouldn’t feel that way,” he says. “We turn people outside the church into enemies with whom we are engaged in warfare, not lost sheep for whom the Shepherd cares and to whom we have been sent.”

Church: The Final Frontier

Yet, while many people out there may not be racing to get to church, a large proportion of them are like Sara, who used to attend the occasional service with Christian friends. All it would take for her to go again would be “just someone to call me and say, ‘Hey, let’s go [to church],’” she told Charisma.

Sara is like the vast majority of those Rainer interviewed, 96 percent of whom said they would go to church “if two things happen: somebody invites them and agrees to meet them and walk into the building with them.” It’s as simple as that, Rainer says. “Yet how many churches are holding their members to some level of expectation to be doing that?”

One reason for the reticence of so many Saras is that churches can be a scary place for the newcomer, offers Ali Hanna. “It’s hard for a pastor to understand,” said the U.S. director of Alpha, the low-key study course successfully used by mostly mainstream churches to draw those interested in exploring issues of faith. “They don’t know where to go, nobody takes them by the arm and shows them where to go. They might sit in the wrong place—in theaters they have different classes of seating—they don’t know why all the people are standing up.”

Rainer agrees, citing the disastrous story of an Arizona woman who decided to visit a church with her child after a divorce. She had trouble parking, found no details of service times and encountered locked doors. She reluctantly left her child with a nursery worker already caring for 18 other kids. When she finally got to the worship center she took a wrong turn and found herself standing in front of the congregation. She never went back.

The debacle confirms the view of pastor Rick Warren, whose Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, California, is one

of the largest congregations in the country and known internationally for its “purpose-driven” approach to church growth.

In a recent message to fellow pastors, he observed that the four most common excuses people make for not attending church are not theological issues. Rather, people don’t understand the sermons, don’t feel welcome, think churches are after their money and are concerned about leaving their children with strangers, he said.

“The truth is, many people are very open to learning about God and spiritual issues, they just don’t feel welcome at church or feel that it has anything to offer them,” he wrote. “That is our problem.”

Back in Seattle, Chris had some final words of advice for the Off the Map attendees: “If you want someone to do what you do, don’t try to convince them. Live your life and be yourself. I have had people come up to me and ask, ‘Do you know if you are going to heaven?’ or preaching, and it really turned me off. I don’t want anything to do with people like that.”

Searching for God

Three mainstream authors look for Him, but can’t find Him.

Joe Kita gave it his best, but to paraphrase the words of a U2 song, he still didn’t find what he was looking for. “Never being able to find God” was one of the major midlife regrets he confronted for a chapter in his recent book, *Another Shot: How I Relived My Life in Less Than a Year*.

Raised Roman Catholic, the Men's Health magazine executive writer visited several churches with his family in an earnest attempt to reconnect with the faith that had somehow passed him by.

He was impressed by the sincerity of the people and the music at a Baptist church, but "things kind of spun out of control from there, and I didn't know what was going on. What is speaking in tongues? Do people really get healed?" His family's disinterest in returning was probably "more ignorance on our part than dislike," he muses, "but I guess all dislike springs from ignorance."

Open as he was to finding some deeper sense of meaning at church, his search failed. His Sunday mornings are once more spent cycling in the Pennsylvania countryside "appreciating all the things that God has given us."

"It's not like I don't believe in God. I consider myself a very religious and spiritual person, but not in the context of organized religion,"he says.

Kita describes himself as "a deeply spiritual skeptic," while Matthew Chapman was more just deeply skeptical when he visited churches in Dayton, Tennessee. The great-great-grandson of Charles Darwin and a Hollywood scriptwriter with a drinking problem, Chapman expected to visit the town's annual reenactment of the famous Scopes Monkey Trial that challenged the teaching of his famous forebear's controversial theory and write a wry commentary.

Although he found some of the expressions of Bible-believing

faith odd and even at times objectionable, he wrote in *Trials of the Monkey: An Accidental Memoir* that “if I went down an atheist, I came back an agnostic.”

Chapman recalled that he had “never felt so magnificently so happy” than when he had believed in God as a child and even dreamed of being a missionary. Now, though it would be, he says, “more pleasant to have faith,” he concludes that he is “too proud to abandon my agnosticism for organized religion or—almost worse—disorganized religion, that laughable stew of whimsical superstitions that constitutes the so-called New Age.”

After skewering the absurdities of the workplace so successfully through his popular *Dilbert* series, cartoonist Scott Adams turned his attention to religion in *God’s Debris*, a short story exploring the meaning of life, which he describes as “a thought experiment.”

While skeptics and “born agnostics” alike have dismissed him as “a shill for the other side,” he says, at least one church is using the book for a Bible class. Adams was raised Methodist until about 11, when he “reached that point where the descriptions of the miracles were not jibing with my day-to-day existence.”

He admits to becoming “increasingly confused” about the existence of God. “There are generally believed to be three answers to the question, ‘Do you believe in God?’” he says. “Yes, no, don’t know. I’m in the fourth category: ‘Could you define that?’”

The Off the Map network wants Christians to change the way they present the gospel in a postmodern world.

When Jim Henderson interviews nonbelievers in front of a crowd of pastors, it's the Christians he is trying to convert.

As one of the founders of Off the Map (OTM), a Seattle-based network exploring new forms of sharing faith in a postmodern world, he wants to change the way believers define and do evangelism. Through conferences and writings, the movement encourages Christians to see the unsaved as "missing" rather than "lost"—the latter being a term Henderson says is often meant in a derogatory way.

Henderson says evangelism should be more about the starting line—seeing people begin moving closer to God—than the finish line: "when you pray the prayer and are in." Rather than asking nonbelievers for something—a decision—he believes Christians should be giving them something—their attention.

"That's what God did with Jesus. He became like us," he says.

Saved through the Jesus Movement of the early 1970s, Henderson has been involved in church planting with Pentecostal and Vineyard churches and now helps lead OTM. He quotes the Oriental classic *The Art of War* as well as the Bible and says too few Christians are involved in evangelism because of what the church has made it.

"What would it be like if evangelism was a normal part of everyday Christian life, like reading the Bible or praying?" he wonders. So OTM promotes evangelism as simply "Christians connecting with non-Christians" and documents stories of what

it calls Ordinary Attempts in which acts of friendship lead to opportunities to talk about faith.

For Michael Howes, minister of adults at a Fort Worth, Texas, church, attending an OTM forum to hear nonbelievers talk about their beliefs and impressions was like “another conversion.” Having grown up in the church, it opened his eyes to how “outsiders” view the church.

After participating in OTM events, Chris Marshall, a church planter in Ohio, has changed the way he views the unchurched. Now rather than seeing them as “targets,” they are “fellow brothers and sisters,” and he says, “I no longer count conversions; rather, I count conversations, and God has been honoring that decision.”

That is one of the keys for Henderson. Too many people outside the church have had an unpleasant encounter with a boorish “born again,” he says. “The big complaint is that Christians don’t listen. They talk. They want to give a speech, but they don’t want to listen. The unchurched do want to talk to a Christian, but they don’t want to be talked at.”

Having to switch places at an OTM event where the unbeliever has the floor is uncomfortable for many.

“You can feel the tension, the anxiety,” he says. But that is the aim of his “surprise attack.”

He explains: “It’s about making them feel something. They don’t need more head knowledge—that won’t solve the problem. People do what they feel more than what they think. Experiences move people to take action. That’s why Jesus took

people out to do things.”

By confronting pastors and others with the reality of how the “lost” think and feel, Henderson says: “I’m not asking them to agree with these people but to please for God’s sake help me understand why they are asking these questions, why they are saying what they are. It’s not their job to save us—they are not on a mission.” *

For more information about Off the Map, write to P.O. Box 1142, Lynnwood, WA 98046; or go to .

Repackaging the Bible

The Good Book is often judged unfairly by its threatening black cover. Some publishers are making the Scriptures more culturally relevant.

Trying to reach the unchurched in a way that is meaningful can cause tensions among believers, as people have discovered at the International Bible Society after taking a pair of scissors to the Scriptures.

Director of product development Glenn Paauw says that, far from abandoning the ministry’s 100-year-plus heritage of commitment to God’s Word, he and his team are simply trying to overcome the barriers that cause many people to dismiss the Bible as irrelevant or outdated.

But some have criticized the group’s stripping away of the accepted and printing individual books of the Bible in

paperback-novel form, without chapter and verse notations. "The form is not holy," contends Paauw. "It's the text, the words; we want to get them in front of people in new ways."

Research shows that 80 percent of people find the traditional format of the Bible "overwhelming, confusing, intimidating." Paauw says: "The black leather Bible is loaded with cultural perceptions that are Bible-bashing religious right, intolerance towards gays, narrow-minded Christians."

"People are very open to Jesus, there's a record number of books about Him. Everybody wants a piece of Jesus, but they drive a wedge between Him and the church and between Him and traditional Christianity. They don't want that other stuff."

But with widespread ignorance about even the most basic Bible stories and teachings, "we have an opportunity to introduce it as a new book," he says.

Paauw and his team at the society's Colorado Springs, Colorado, headquarters scour magazines, television and the Internet for "cultural artifacts" that help them better understand the unchurched's values and beliefs. Among the projects their research has prompted is the Discovering Ancient Wisdom series, which packages the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job, and some of the sayings of Jesus into a New Age-looking gift set for distribution among students. They advertise them in magazines such as New Age and the counterculture Utne Reader.

Paauw believes that Christian groups can lose the plot—their reason for being—if they are not careful. Or they can be in

too much of a hurry. “We [think we are] answering questions, but they aren’t even sure what the questions are yet.”

Andy Butcher is senior writer for Charisma and editor of Charisma News Service. Reporters Steve Lawson and Jeff King interviewed people in Los Angeles and Seattle to provide quotes from unbelievers.