

10 Insightful Ways You Can Minister to the Modern Unchurched Family

Many years ago when our church began revitalization, we prayed and asked God whom he was calling us to reach.

The answer we felt God impressing upon us then was to focus on unchurched families.

So we created strategies and programs designed to reach out to them.

God showed up, and we began making inroads to reach these families, but something unexpected happened.

They changed.

In fact, while we were busy perfecting the plans and programs we had used to reach the average unchurched family, the entire culture shifted.

Here we are 16 years later, and we have discovered we needed to re-evaluate everything in light of these radical cultural shifts.

As we stepped back and took a fresh look at the average unchurched family God is bringing to us, we have noted some characteristics that have become the foundation for reinventing our structures, strategies and programs.

So, what does the “average” unchurched family look like today?

1. They are a blended home. A total of 43 percent of all marriages are remarriages, and 65 percent of those involve children from a prior marriage. Blended families are becoming the norm.

Not to mention that nearly 41 percent of children are born of unmarried parents. Many of our families have been together for years but have never been legally married.

More than half of the children in our programming come from these family realities.

This means little Billy probably comes so sporadically because that's how often he's with the family that attends our church.

POINT: Don't scold Billy when he shows up or say things like "We sure wish you were here last week when we had our big fun time." Children's programs need to maximize every weekend, recognizing we may only get Billy about 20 times in a year. Programming must realistically deal with the new family norms.

2. They are spiritually mismatched. Families typically begin attending our church due to just one of the adult guardians. Most often it's "Mom" (I put Mom in quotes because she may or may not be the biological mother of the children she's bringing) who makes the connection first. She starts coming, bringing the kids along, while "Dad" is busy "enjoying his only day off" back at home.

POINT: Don't make Mom feel awkward for not being there with her husband. Equip her to be the spiritual leader in the home without alienating Dad. Celebrate that she has worked hard to get her family there. Create on-ramps that will make it easier for her to invite her husband to come with her. Maximize special events that create bridges into the life of the spiritually mismatched partner. Offer small groups Mom would feel comfortable being a part of.

3. They are financially strapped. According to Pew research, the average middle-class family cannot absorb even one financial catastrophe. Credit has become a way of life for the American household, digging ever-deeper holes of debt with no end in sight. In other words, they're strapped.

These families need more from a church than just another organization asking for their money. They need help. They desperately need more than just understanding what tithing is all about. They need the basics. They need to learn how to earn, budget, spend and save their money. Fortunately, the Bible is one of the greatest manuals for money management on the planet.

POINT: Churches must teach on money beyond giving. We must offer classes on sound money management. In addition, when planning events and programs such as camps and conferences, we need to consider whether the average family in our church could afford this and how we can make these extras more accessible.

4. They are over-calendared. Most families are driven by the schedule of the kids: practices, games, recitals and more. And just in case you haven't noticed, none of these extracurricular activities could give a flip if they conflict with church. Parents have become the willing slaves of these activities, and even the most dedicated Christian families have decided to play tag on the weekend, with one of them taking little Billy or Susie to their activity while the other parent takes the leftovers to church.

Add to that chaos the fact that the standard workweek isn't standard any more. Many families are working 50-60 hours a week on a rotating schedule that cuts right through the weekend (yes, that includes Sundays).

POINT: Churches must become incredibly creative in their programming. Most offer only two choices: take it or leave it. Missional churches work hard to accomplish two objectives: 1. How do we make this more accessible? 2. How do we shorten this? You can either curse the culture or become "wise as serpents" (Matt. 10:16b).

5. They are biblically illiterate. They have absolutely no

idea what the Bible actually says.

To many, it is a dark, mysterious book filled with antiquated dictums of morality that are no longer relevant in the 21st century, or it is a compilation of fables and fairy tales intended to teach some life lesson.

To others, the Bible is a book that tells of an angry deity bent on suppressing happiness and destroying homosexuals.

One thing is certain: Nearly all of them are misguided about the true content of Scripture.

It's clear that many Americans—including Christians—don't know their Bible. Just look at the numbers from a recent study:

- More than 60 percent of Americans can't name either half of the Ten Commandments or the four Gospels of the New Testament.
- Some 80 percent (including "born-again" Christians) believe "God helps those who help themselves" is a direct quote from the Bible.
- And 31 percent believe a good person can earn his/her way into heaven.

POINT: Churches need to stop assuming their audience has any biblical knowledge whatsoever. Stop saying stupid things like, "Open your Bibles to ..." or, "I hope you brought your Bibles ..." or even worse, "I hope you have a real Bible with you this morning and not some silly Bible app on your phone." Have you not figured out yet that they don't own a Bible? We've got to begin at the beginning. Tell them how to get a good Bible. Teach the Word for clarity, not to show off your academic prowess. Offer classes that introduce people to God's Word. Teach the stories of the Bible. Help people with Bible reading plans that make it easy for them to begin their journey.

6. They are ethnically diverse. I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in the shadow of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy.

That means my parents and grandparents were culturally racist, meaning segregation was a cultural norm. Even if they didn't embrace racism, they saw it as an acceptable division.

My generation had the knowledge that racial segregation was wrong, but most still lived under the unspoken cloud of racial suspicion/tension.

Millennials can't relate to any of that.

Up to 8.4 percent of new marriages are now interracial. This is up from .4 percent in 1960.

And although the culture has come a long way from the 1960s, most churches have not.

POINT: I can think of few practical programs designed to increase the welcoming of racial diversity. I think the most powerful cues come directly from the leadership. People pick up on the silent sense of acceptance we telegraph. Church leaders must ask themselves how they truly feel about racial diversity. Do they see problems to be solved or people to be loved?

7. They have a special-needs child. Families with special-needs children are on the rise.

- 2 percent of children are diagnosed with autism
- 7 percent are diagnosed with ADHD
- 8 percent have a learning disability
- 14 percent have a developmental disability
- 17 percent of Americans experience a communication disorder
- 19 percent of Americans are classified as a person with a disability
- 2 percent of 13- to 18-year-olds are identified with an anxiety disorder
- 12 percent of the children in K-6 in our public schools are identified with a disability. Are 12 percent of the

kids in our church programs identified as having a disability? Probably not. The reason may simply be because our churches are not ready to receive them.

POINT: Churches that are serious about reaching unchurched families need to begin thinking of ways we can reach families with special-needs children. These families need the greatest amount of help. Granted, these needs are widely varied, immensely challenging and highly complex. However, sometimes even small changes in our programs and approach can make a world of difference.

8. One in five has experienced some form of trauma in the home. Abuse is common among families today. Whether it is domestic violence or sexual assault, there is a tremendous amount of pain behind the closed doors of American families.

- 1 in 4 women are sexually assaulted in their lifetime
- 44 percent of those were under 18 when it occurred
- Two-thirds of all sexual assaults were conducted by a family member or close friend
- On average, nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States. During one year, this equates to more than 10 million women and men.
- One in 15 children is exposed to domestic violence each year, and 90 percent of these children are eyewitnesses to this violence.

POINT: Churches need to do more than preach and teach. They should not be country clubs for cool Christians. They need to become hospitals for the hurting and must bring hope and healing.

9. They want to be successful. Unchurched families are coming with a myriad of challenges, yet they want to build successful homes.

They want to be a good parent, but they aren't sure how. They

want to have a good marriage, but they aren't sure what that even looks like. They want to build a home that is a haven of harmony, but they find themselves trapped in a cycle of repeating the patterns of their own upbringing. They have an image of what they'd like to become, but they have no idea how to get there.

POINT: Churches can tap into that desire by offering practical applications families can begin to implement at home. Churches are not supposed to be the primary spiritual equipping unit for the family—parents are! Churches must begin to shift their mindset from “We’re the experts” to “We’re the equippers,” with the goal of making the home the primary disciple-making environment for the family.

10. They are spiritually hungry. Wow, the American family seems to be in real trouble.

Yes, it is, but the good news is best when the need is the greatest. Bad times for the culture are good times for the church.

All of these characteristics are screaming, “We need Jesus!”

Make no mistake, many of these families are hungry for change. They sense an emptiness for something deeper. They’re searching for truth and meaning and hope and healing.

And they’re wondering if Christianity just might be what they’ve been looking for.

May we be the church that throws fuel on the fire of their quest.

May we remove every unnecessary encumbrance and unbiblical distraction and be the place of grace that reaches the ones for whom Christ gave his very life. {eoa}

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