

15 Characteristics of Unchurched People

by Carey Nieuwhof

1. They Don't All Have Big 'Problems.'

If you're waiting for unchurched people to show up because their life is falling apart, you might wait a long time. Sure, there are always people in crisis who seek God out. But many are quite content with their lives without God. And some are quite happy and successful. If you only know how to speak into discontent and crisis, you will miss most of your neighbours.

2. They Feel Less Guilty Than You Think.

They don't feel any more guilty about not being in church on Sunday than you feel guilty about not being in synagogue on Saturdays. How many Saturdays do you feel bad about missing synagogue? That's how many Sundays they feel bad about missing church. In fact, many unchurched people view their free Sunday mornings as a benefit to no longer going to church. This may hurt some pastors' feelings, but a morning hike or Sunday brunch with friends is often preferable to sitting through a church service.

3. Occasional Is Regular.

If they do decide to "try out" church again, they don't always attend every week. Giving them easy, obvious, and strategic steps to get connected is important. Disconnected people generally don't stick.

4. Most Are Spiritual.

Most unchurched people believe in some kind of God. They're surprised and offended if you think of them as atheists. As they should be. And many unchurched people still consider themselves Christian. They're often honest about their struggles with faith and have a pretty good explanation for why they don't attend church anymore. So, in other words, don't assume they're "godless atheists" who have betrayed their faith. In a lot of cases, talking with an unchurched person will give you a more honest assessment of what's going on with the church than with a regular attendee.

5. They Are Not Sure What "Christian" Means.

So, you need to make that clear. You really can't make any assumptions about what people understand about the Christian faith. In most cases, the unchurched may have more issues with a particular "brand" of Christianity (like a hyper-partisan, right-wing Christian nationalism) than they do with Jesus and the Bible.

6. You Can't Call Them Back To Something They Never Knew.

Old school 'revival' meant there was something to revive. Now that we are on the second to fifth generation of unchurched people, revival is less helpful, to say the least. You can't call them back to something they never knew.

7. Many Have Tried Church, Even a Little, but Left.

When I was a pastor, we had a good chunk of people who had never ever been to church (60% of our growth was from people who self-identified as not regularly attending church}, but a surprising number of people have tried church at some point - as a kid or young adult. Because it wasn't a good experience, they stopped going to church. Remember that...

8. Their Definition of Generosity Is Different.

Because even giving 10% of your income to anything is radically countercultural, the only paradigm of giving the unchurched have is a few dozen or hundred dollars to select charities. Additionally, in an era of rising cost-of-living and stagnant wages, giving may not be what it used to be. Many young people – not just the unchurched — view giving their time as an act of generosity. So, use that as an opportunity to involve them in volunteer or outreach activities in the community. I hope every Christian learns to live a life of sacrifice and generosity, but telling them they are ungenerous is a poor way to start the conversation.

9. They Want You To Be Christian.

They want you to follow Jesus, authentically. Most unchurched people have a surprisingly positive view of Jesus and his teachings in the Bible (and, in some cases, much more nuanced than you might expect). So, they're holding you (and your congregation) to a standard that might be somewhat Biblical.

10. They're Intelligent, so Speak to That.

Don't speak down to them. Most unchurched people aren't looking for a shallow spiritual experience that affirms their pre-existing assumptions about the world. They want to be challenged. They want to ask hard questions and dive deep.

11. They Hate Hypocrisy.

We live in a cynical, distrustful era. And any scent of hypocrisy is going to send an unchurched person rushing for the exit. Most of us are already primed to expect the worst from religious organisations – so live with integrity and challenge your congregation to do the same. And I know that sounds like an obvious challenge, but Christians have done more damage to the reputation of the church than non-Christians or the unchurched, so it needs to be said.

12. They Love Transparency.

When you share your weaknesses, everyone (including Christians) resonates. Unchurched people don't want to hear about how God took away all of your problems and "everything is awesome now" – because they know it's not true. They want you to be honest about your struggles with life and with your faith. When was the last time you admitted to your congregation that you struggle with doubt, argue with your spouse, or worry about money? Guess what. Sharing those details doesn't make you less of a leader – it makes you more relatable.

13. They Invite Their Friends if They Like What They're Discovering.

Unchurched people are often pretty social. They want to experience things together, with people they love and enjoy spending time with. They will be your best inviters if they love what you're doing and will help grow and build an engaged church culture.

14. Their Spiritual Growth Trajectory Varies Dramatically.

One size does not fit all. You need a flexible on-ramp that allows people to hang in the shadows for a while as they make up their minds and one that allows multiple jumping-in points throughout the year.

15. Some Want To Be Anonymous, and Some Don't.

So, make your church friendly to both. Not everyone wants to immediately be pushed up to the front of the congregation for an altar call or thrown in the children's ministry. Sometimes, we can overwhelm people who are trying to figure out if church is right for them again. Let them go at their own pace.

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